Of Black & Gold: the Binding Souls
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Of Black & Gold: the Binding Souls

by AzuliaStar

Summary

"To possess a soul, to lose it, to give it away — what, in the end, is the difference?"

Some souls are split for eternity, some souls are shared in infinity, and others must be saved from finality.

As the Revolution takes its first true stand and the wizarding world fractures, Regulus realises that the battle for a soul is far more dangerous than the battle for a cause.

Isa turned to James, unimpressed. "Let me guess — seeing as your head's stuck up there all the time, I'd wager you mostly smell your arse."

James's eyes glinted with something wicked, something challenging. He leaned back even further in his chair, looking completely content.

"Oh no, Nott," he said smoothly, taking a slow, deliberate bite of his apple. "I don't smell mine."

Regulus, who had been preoccupied with not paying attention, suddenly realised exactly what James meant.

He choked.

Notes

Okay, so I might have said I was going to deep clean my life before working on/publishing the third book...

I did not clean a thing, neither deep nor shallow.

Instead, I wrote. And I ate chocolate. Loads of chocolate.

So, without further ado.... The third book, yeey!

As for the first and second book, mind the warnings; graphic depictions of literally everything (violence, abuse, sex and so on, and so forth).

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Prologue

Always remember what you're fighting for, Regulus.

Regulus groaned, twisting beneath the sounds, the scents, the sensations of his dreams. His body was slick with sweat, which had less to do with the extraordinary heat of the summer and more with the memories that returned to mock him. They floated in his mind softly at first, then surged until there was nothing but that sensation — that voice, the begging, the hollow thud of a body collapsing to the floor. Motionless. Lifeless.

Regulus's chest rose and fell in uneven gasps. His duvet tangled around his legs and he tossed it aside with a sharp jerk. Like always, the voice began to master him, creeping into every part of his mind, every fiber of his body. He clenched his jaw, his fingers twitching as if trying to hold on to reality, to resist being sucked into that endless loop of dread.

It is all connected.

A strangled noise escaped his throat as he turned over again, his fingers now gripping the mattress. The sheets clung damply to his back, a physical suffocation mirroring the one in his mind. His breath quickened. As always, the voice did not relent.

It's all connected, Regulus. Hate for Muggleborns, hate for Halfbloods. Hate for everyone who… loves differently.

His body shuddered violently. The voice was near now, just beside his ear — then fading, then roaring back again. He winced, his head jerking to the side.

No. Go away. No. Just stay away. Don't — don't—

He was my cousin, you know. Your governor.

Still asleep, Regulus thrashed. His pillow flew from the bed, landing with a thud on the floor, unfortunately too muffled to wake him. His head shook, his lips moving without sound. No. No. *No*.

Kill me, Regulus. Take your revenge.

A rush of green light. A searing flash.

“NO!”

Regulus’s eyes snapped open. Still unable to make anything of anything, he lurched upright, gasping, his entire body trembling. Sweat dripped from his temples as his heart hammered so fiercely it hurt.

The room was bathed in the dim glow of early morning, the only sound his ragged breathing. He dragged a shaking hand down his face, fingers pressing against his closed eyes as if to wipe away the remnants of the nightmare, of the voice echoing in his mind.

Just a dream. Just another one of those bloody, damned dreams. *Just a dream.*

*****

The weeks following Thorne’s death were the loneliest he had ever felt in his life — and considering his childhood, the competition was fierce. This time, though, the solitude was mostly by choice.

He knew Isa had wanted nothing more than for him to stay in Damascus. She definitely hadn’t been told what had happened, hadn’t been told that her best friend had killed her former Professor in her own bloody home — but from the commotion, the people arriving at her doorstep, she would be smart enough to know that something grave had happened, and that it involved Regulus and her father. He knew she was probably worrying herself sick, despite the carefully worded, painfully fake letters he sent, assuring her he was fine.

Cissy, too, had done her best to keep him close. She had invited him to stay at Malfoy Manor indefinitely, but Regulus had simply thanked her for the offer and insisted he was alright. Eventually, they had settled on an unspoken compromise; an open Floo connection and Cissy popping by a bit too often for his liking.

Which also meant James couldn’t.

Not that it would have happened anyway. James staying over at Black Manor had been a strange accumulation of want and missing and, on James’s side, a futile hope that Regulus was, by James’s definition, a good person.

Yes, in the days following Damascus, when the silence pressed in and left him too much room to analyse every moment, every decision, Regulus had come to the evident conclusion that saving Davies had

probably encouraged James to cling to the idea that Regulus wasn't beyond saving. That there was something good in him, like there was in Sirius, whom he had been able to save, too. Little did James know that while he might have saved Davies, he'd killed two people in mere days following that.

Still, even though Regulus knew it would have been reckless, even though he knew it was a terrible idea, Regulus couldn't help but think that James's animated stories and his infectious laugh might have been the only things capable of making him forget all that had happened, and that James's body pressed against his in the night might have been the only thing capable of keeping the nightmares at bay.

So, with James absent, Isa stuck in Damascus, Cissy dropping by only occasionally, Barty in Germany, and Evan in Italy, Regulus spent the first month of the holidays mostly alone. The only human contact he had — which proved even rather effective in pulling him from the whirlpool of darkness and despair — came from a rather unexpected place.

The fleeting thought of visiting Marie-Anne had lingered ever since he and James had met up near the bookstore in London. So, after another short, sweat-drenched night spent battling his dreams, he woke up, determined to find something — anything — to occupy his mind and set out for the bookstore, hoping to find a few good books to take his mind off things.

It turned out to be exactly what he needed.

Marie-Anne, clearly bored from the summer lull and fed up with tourists who popped in and out without buying anything, had been more than relieved to see him. She had set about gathering books she thought he might like, poured him coffee, fed him scones and engaged him in discussions about philosophers and politicians before inevitably venturing into stories of her university life and before he even realised it, the entire afternoon had slipped away.

He had returned twice already, and each visit had proven just as worthwhile.

It was oddly refreshing to step into a world untouched by war. The Muggles had their own conflicts, of course, but they felt distant — little more than news reports about war with the Soviets or Soviet invasions in some far-off Asian country, nothing that left a mark on

the streets of London.

And besides, Marie-Anne was good company; she loved to talk, he liked to listen, and she knew a great deal about the subjects that interested him.

So, on that particular summer day in mid-July, he was set on taking the Knight Bus to London, eager to discuss the book he'd just finished and drink some of Marie-Anne's exquisite coffee — when, unfortunately, Cissy intervened, insisting on having lunch in the garden of Black Manor.

They lay near the pond on a blanket, lunch spread out beside them. The summer had been unusually warm and today was no exception. The sun was hot and warm, making Regulus realise that wearing trousers and a long-sleeve t-shirt in the middle of the heat had been a mistake. Cissy, far more sensible, wore only a light summer dress, clearly enjoying the warmth as they lay on their backs, side by side, gazing up at the brilliant blue sky.

"So I asked Camellia if she could give me any information about the OWL results, but she said she doesn't have access yet."

Regulus gave her a weak, sideways smile. "It's fine, Cissy. I'm truly not worried."

"Of course you aren't. You definitely did a terrific job."

Regulus was sure he hadn't seen so much of his cousin in ages — she'd practically forced him to open up the fireplace so she could pop by at any random moment, an opportunity she seized with both hands on an almost daily basis. Lucius was busy with the Revolution, and after the happenings in Damascus, Cissy apparently felt the need to check up on him at such a rate it started to get under his skin.

He tried not to — tried not to be annoyed by it. He knew she meant well, knew she had always meant well, knew she was practically the only one unconditionally on his side. Even from early childhood, Cissy would always side with him, stand up for him, function as a bridge between him and the people who struggled to understand him — mostly Mother and Father. Even in the darkest of times, even when she was still very much a child herself, she had vouched for him, stood with him in a way no adult somehow ever managed.

So, taking this into account, he really, truly tried not to be annoyed by her overly protective demeanor ever since Damascus. But he failed —

it annoyed him, how she'd ask how he was doing multiple times over the course of two hours, trying to find the right timing, the right moment for him to crack, to finally open up about his thoughts and feelings. It annoyed him that she often, on purpose, steered the conversation toward something that would serve as a prelude to the topic she truly wanted to discuss — Damascus. It annoyed him to the bone that with everything she did, with every word she carefully chose, she wanted to create room for all the emotions and sensations he was trying so desperately to smother, to suffocate, to kill — the dread, the guilt, the inescapability of Victor Thorne's death. The slashing, crushing reality of Regulus having pointed his wand at him, seeing the light die in his eyes as he'd collapsed onto the ground.

"Where is he? I knew it! Oh, he's mine — none of you get to have him —" Bellatrix screamed, but her voice had faltered at the sight of Thorne's lifeless body on the floor.

Regulus barely registered the commotion, the sounds of people storming into the room. He stood nailed to the ground, utterly frozen, his wand still trembling in his hand, his breath shallow. Everything around him felt muted, distant, unreal.

He was there, yet he wasn't.

A soft voice broke through the fog — Lucius.

He was beside him now, his presence calm as he gently lowered Regulus's arm and took the wand from his unresisting fingers.

Regulus sputtered, his voice cracking. "I — I — he wanted — he was going to… flee."

Lucius nodded, his lips curling into a reassuring smile, though Regulus barely processed it. Barely processed anything at all, but the eyes, the brown eyes that he had voided of life, that were still open but empty, lifeless now, staring at him from the floor, making him sick and dizzy.

"He — he is a spy — he tipped off—tipped off Legot—"

And somehow, despite the fog, the fuss, the cloud of shock and despair, Regulus's mind managed to welcome a glimmer of genius.

"He — he said something about… freeing someone… from the basement…"

He felt Mr. Nott appearing at his other side, his hand firm on his shoulder.

Regulus looked sideways into the eyes of Isa's father — the eyes a mix of disbelief and resolution. Mr. Nott's sharp gaze met Lucius's before he gave a decisive nod.

"Let's get you out of here," Mr. Nott said, his voice low and steady, controlled.

Regulus barely registered how he was led out of the library, barely noticed the descent down the stairs, the golden sunlight breaking through the glass dome of the Hall. The world felt heavy, blurred… utterly unreal.

"You did great, Regulus," Mr. Nott murmured as he guided him into the morning room.

Regulus nodded absently, his gaze flicking toward the door just in time to catch a glimpse of Isa in the room across the hall — her expression worried, confused — before her father shut the door behind them.

A voice yanked him back to the present.

"Have you been sleeping?"

Regulus blinked, his breath catching as he reoriented himself. Cissy's face hovered beside him, concern evident in her pale blue eyes.

"Yeah," Regulus croaked, although it was a big, fat lie.

"I just can't believe it, you know," Cissy sighed, turning her gaze back to the sky. "I trusted him — I liked him, even."

Regulus swallowed.

He understood — he'd liked Thorne, too. He couldn't really place it, but he had felt like… more than a Professor, more than a fellow Revolutionary. He'd been there from the start, from the beginning Regulus had been involved in the Revolution. Had been with him at Beauxbatons. Nights and nights they'd spent on the Pure Quill together, countless owls had they exchanged… He'd been the only one with whom Regulus had been able to connect over things that actually mattered; discussing world affairs endlessly, diving into philosophical debates and ethical dilemmas, going through news reports and finding the truth behind words. No — Thorne had been exactly what Regulus had needed; a male, adolescent who understood him, whom he looked up to and who had taken him seriously, and who'd subtly advise him on personal matters, too.

And he had betrayed him. Had betrayed the cause. Had betrayed the Revolution.

And he, Regulus, had had to kill him.

Regulus's throat went dry.

"I'm going to head out soon," he said finally, pushing himself up onto his elbows. "I need some supplies. Might go to Diagon Alley."

Cissy hesitated, her expression shifting — not quite convinced, but not pressing either. "I could come with you."

"Don't bother," he replied, forcing a smile.

Because, truth be told, he didn't want her to come. And, truth be told – he wasn't going to Diagon Alley at all.

He was going to Muggle London.

*****

"So, *I* had to retake the exam while Madeleine passed — talk to me about life being unfair," Marie-Anne huffed, shaking her head in disbelief.

She had been ranting about her final exams and the various people who had made her life miserable at university — an impassioned monologue that had now stretched on for well over half an hour and was, in all fairness, starting to get a bit tedious. Not that Regulus minded, generally — he found it fascinating to get a glimpse into how the Muggle world functioned and more often than not, he was forced to conclude that Muggles, despite their lack of magic, seemed to manage remarkably well.

Marie-Anne was in her final year of a joint honours degree in History and English, currently in the process of applying to several master's programs. She wouldn't hear back for a few weeks, but it had become pointedly clear that the waiting was making her nervous.

Regulus tilted his head slightly. "And your Professor couldn't help you?"

Marie-Anne scoffed. "Oh, this wasn't a Professor — just a lecturer."

Regulus winced — apparently Professor meant something else in the Muggle world.

Marie-Anne smiled. Her gaze flicked to the stack of books on the side table beside him. “Gosh, here I am, rambling on and distracting you.”

Regulus shook his head. “It’s fine.” He hesitated, glancing at his clock on the wall. “But I probably should leave soon.”

That’s when he realised he had been there for four hours.

“I think I might be the one distracting *you* from work, actually.” He straightened in his chair. “I should get going.”

Marie-Anne stretched her arms above her head, stifling a yawn. “You’re not wrong — I was supposed to close up soon, anyway. Just need to pack some of these books away first.”

Regulus hesitated, feeling bad for taking up so much of her time. She had perhaps talked to two customers while he’d been there, and hadn’t sold a single book.

“I can help,” he offered.

Marie-Anne gave him a look, amused but not unwilling to accept the offer. “You sure? I don’t usually make my customers earn their keep.”

Regulus shrugged. “Consider it payment for the free conversation.”

Together, they moved around the small shop, stacking books, tidying shelves and flipping the sign on the door to *Closed*. The whole process took no more than fifteen minutes, and soon enough, they stood by the entrance, the street outside bathed in the golden glow of early evening.

Marie-Anne slung her bag over her shoulder and grinned. “Hope to see you soon, Regibald.”

Regulus winced at the name, but she was already waving him off as she walked away.

After following her with his eyes for a moment, he turned in the opposite direction, books stacked under one arm. He reached into his magically extended pocket to pull his summer cloak out as he stepped off the main road, searching for a more secluded spot to pull on his cloak and summon the Knight bus, when he jolted at the sound of a sharp honk.

He barely had time to turn before a small car rolled up beside him.

The passenger-side window rolled down with a rattling sound.

Marie-Anne leaned over. “Where you off to?”

Regulus blinked. “Oh, no, it’s alright. I’ll walk—”

But she was already pushing the passenger door open, gesturing him inside.

Regulus blinked, frozen.

What the hell was he supposed to do now?

He should pass on the offer, right? Being in *Muggle* London — in that *Muggle bookstore* for hours on end was already bad enough; stepping into the *car* with a *Muggle* …

He should decline. Obviously.

And yet—

Curiosity stirred in his chest. He had never been in a car before. He had only ever observed them from a distance, seen how Muggles moved in and out of them like it was the most normal thing in the world. He had read descriptions in Sirius’s old Muggle Studies books, enough to more or less grasp how they worked. But to *see* one from the inside…

Oh, the hell with it.

He stepped forward and slid into the seat.

*****

It had escalated quickly.

Regulus *had* tried — truly — to contain his sheer awe at being inside a moving Muggle vehicle. But it was extremely hard when there were so many *things* — buttons and flaps and lids and clasps… And the stick in the middle that Marie-Anne kept yanking around for Merlin knew what, and the fact that she needed a *whole wheel* to steer…

Marie-Anne had, though, completely misread his wide-eyed amazement and had figured that Regulus — or Regibald, as she thought he was called – was so impressed because he had never driven a car before.

Which had led to the inevitable.

She had driven them to a shopping centre parking lot in Greenwich and had — yes, really — decided to teach him how to drive a bloody car.

So, in a deeply bizarre turn of events, Regulus found himself in the driver's seat, gripping the wheel like it was a cursed artifact about to explode.

Of all the absurd things he had done in the past month — killing a child molester dragged from a prison in Turkey, executing his own mentor for being a spy, rescuing Isa's secret lover from Bellatrix's personal torture chamber, and, most baffling of all, sleeping with James Potter in Black Manor and declaring his love for him — this… being taught how to drive a bloody car by a Muggle girl… might actually make it to the top of the list of the weirdest fucking things that had happened to him.

It wasn't just weird, though — it was equally *brilliant*.

Marie-Anne was gesturing enthusiastically, her ponytail bouncing as she explained something about something called the clutch. "Alright, you just ease off gently while giving it some gas — gently, Reg, *gently* —"

Naturally, the car lurched forward violently.

Regulus clenched his jaw, determined — he truly didn't like being bad at things. And he was a bloody wizard, surely he could drive a stupid Muggle car? The idea that Marie-Anne could drive and *he* couldn't; it felt oddly insulting.

Marie-Anne, however, was unfazed. "Wow, that was actually really good for a first try!" she said brightly.

Regulus, who felt like he had narrowly escaped death, gave her a flat look.

Still, after a few more tries — one of which nearly sent them careening into a shopping cart return station — he managed to drive in a passably straight line around the parking lot. And then, a little while later, he had clearly gotten the hang of it and could actually rather smoothly maneuver the car.

Marie-Anne was ecstatic.

“Alright, alright, you’ve got it! Oh, I *knew* you’d be a natural!” she chirped, clapping her hands together.

That was when she dropped the bombshell.

“Let’s go.”

Regulus blinked. “Go where?”

“Leadenhall Market, right? That’s where you were headed?”

His hands tightened on the wheel. His heart stopped. “You mean — *drive* there?”

She gave him a confused look. “Well, yeah, obviously. You’re doing great! Shifts are a bit rough, but you’re picking it up fast. Really impressive for someone who’s never driven before.”

Regulus was torn between deep, sensible hesitation and an odd swell of pride. It felt good to be good at this — to prove that even in the Muggle world, he was still competent….

Marie-Anne cranked up the radio.

Regulus exhaled slowly. Right. He could do this.

He *would* do this.

And, to his shock, he did.

Exiting the parking lot was terrifying, but once he was actually on the road, Marie-Anne kept guiding him and he actually started to enjoy it. It was exhilarating — weaving through traffic, the thrill of controlling this hunk of metal with nothing but his hands and feet, his wand completely forgotten in his pocket….

The wind blew through the open windows — a welcome feature in the humid evening air. Regulus had rolled up his sleeves and found it refreshing that all he got from the sight of the Mark was an impressed look and compliment from Marie-Anne.

Regulus allowed himself a small smirk as he smoothly made his way through traffic, following Marie-Anne’s directions because he had no bloody clue how to drive to Leadenhall Market — he didn’t even need to go there, of course, but it was the only location that had come to mind, it being the location of the Muggle entrance of Diagon Alley.

“Mind the traffic light!”

The light turned red. Regulus stopped, rolling to a surprisingly smooth halt. He exhaled, feeling oddly triumphant. He *was* good at this.

He glanced around, taking in the sights — the shops, the people, the—

His gaze met a pair of wide, green eyes.

Familiar, green eyes.

The Mudblood. Lily bloody Evans.

Standing on the pavement, bags in her arms, staring at him in open-mouthed shock.

Oh, fuck.

Regulus, clutching the steering wheel like his life depended on it, stared back, frozen in absolute, utter horror.

A car behind him honked.

He didn’t move.

Evans’s eyes flicked to Marie-Anne, then to the Muggle car, then back to Regulus, her face shifting from shock to outright disbelief.

He couldn’t blame her, really — it sure wasn’t everyday that one saw Regulus Arcturus Black, Heir of the Noble and Ancient House of Black, driving a bloody car in Muggle London next to a Muggle girl.

God, it was enough to make someone faint.

Marie-Anne, meanwhile, completely unaware that Regulus was internally screaming, turned down the music and beamed.

“Oh, hey — do you two know each other?”

Regulus, still locked in shock, managed a stiff, “Err — yeah — something like that.”

Marie-Anne, utterly failing to read the room, just nodded happily.

“Oh, brilliant! Hey, what’s your name?”

Evans was still staring directly at Regulus as if just looking at him long

enough would make her understand this bizarre situation which she was clearly still trying to grasp.

She coughed uncomfortably and blinked.

“Lily,” she said, slowly.

Marie-Anne grinned. “Nice! Where you headed?”

Evans glanced at Regulus again, who was still completely frozen in place.

She hesitated, eyes narrowing slightly before answering.

“…Leadenhall Market.”

Regulus winced.

Of *course* she was going to Leadenhall Market. Of *course* she was headed to the exact same bloody place he was now driving to.

Fuck.

“Oh, perfect!” Marie-Anne chirped. “We’re headed there too. Hop in!”

Regulus opened his mouth to protest — to say *no, absolutely not, bad idea, terrible idea* — but the continuous honking of the cars behind them was definitely working on everyone’s nerves and well, eventually, Evans just… stiffly got in the car.

Regulus felt his entire soul leave his body.

The moment Evans shut the door, her eyes immediately snapped to Regulus, who looked seconds away from having a full existential crisis.

Evans’s gaze flicked rapidly between him and Marie-Anne.

That, along with another sharp honk from behind, forced Regulus back to reality.

The first thing he remembered was to roll down his sleeves — Marie-Anne might have thought the tattoo to be very cool, Regulus had an inkling that Mudblood Evans might not take quite so kindly to the Mark on his arm.

The second thing he managed to do was snap his head around, lock

eyes with Evans and subtly mouth *'Muggle'*, his eyes flicking towards Marie-Anne in emphasis.

The only thing able to add to the sheer absurdity of this situation would be a memo to the Ministry that the Statute had been breached in front of a Muggle in the presence of *Regulus Black* and *Lily Evans* in a bloody car.

Evans's expression went from confused to deeply, profoundly perplexed.

Marie-Anne, still oblivious to the absolute shitshow she had just created, turned up the music again and smiled.

"Alright then! Off we go, Reg!"

Regulus let out a tiny, strangled noise and then, almost mechanically, started driving.

He gripped the wheel with white-knuckled intensity as the car lurched forward and pointedly ignored Evans's incredulous stare burning into the side of his face.

Through some miracle, he managed to ease the car smoothly onto the main road and, taking a quick peek at her in the rearview mirror, he was sure he'd never seen someone as baffled as Evans was at that particular moment.

That is, until Marie-Anne opened her mouth again.

"So, you two go to the same boarding school?" she asked brightly, twisting in her seat to glance between them.

Regulus, meanwhile, focused on shifting gears — Back to two. Ease off the coupling. More gas. *Yes.*

"Yes," Evans answered after a pause, since Regulus was too occupied trying not to stall the car in the middle of London traffic.

Marie-Anne sighed contentedly. "It's nice, Reg, to finally meet some of your friends."

Evans, who had just barely begun to process the fact that Regulus Black was driving a car, turned sharply toward Marie-Anne. "You two… have known each other long?"

Marie-Anne nodded, throwing a playful wink in Regulus's direction.

“Oh, yes, Reg and I go way back.”

Regulus didn’t dare to look at Evans, but he could feel the way she quirked an eyebrow, her head tilting just slightly in unmistakable disbelief.

God, this conversation could not get any weirder.

“I’ve never really met his friends, though,” Marie-Anne mused. “Well — except for James, of course.”

Regulus nearly choked.

Wrong. *Wrong.* The conversation *could* get weirder.

Regulus stiffened, his foot pressing slightly harder on the gas pedal in pure, unfiltered alarm.

They lurched forward.

Evans’s head snapped toward Marie-Anne. “You mean — James *Potter*?”

Regulus clung to the fleeting hope that Marie-Anne at least didn’t know James’s last name — it was his only rescue now. James was a common name; he could just pretend she was talking about another James.

Well, until, Marie-Anne started describing him.

“Brown, messy hair, glasses, muscular, extremely handsome—”

“Fuck me,” Regulus hissed under his breath.

Evans, if possible, looked even more baffled than before.

Desperation clawed at Regulus. He had to come up with some kind of explanation — needed to get ahead of this before the entire afternoon escalated into full-blown catastrophe.

“We ran into each other at her shop once,” he cut in, his voice strained. “He was in London with my brother.”

Evans was too busy processing all the conflicting information penetrating her brain that she only managed to look at him, stunned.

Thankfully, Marie-Anne and Evans then plunged into easy

conversation about university life and all that, while Regulus tried his best to maneuver the car smoothly through traffic.

Unfortunately, Marie-Anne often tended to forget that this was, in fact, the first time Regulus was driving a car, and he had no bloody clue where to drive to. Marie-Anne decided to direct him from Greenwich to the centre of London via the Tower Bridge, explaining that the London Bridge would've been more direct but a 'much less stunning route'.

Regulus, still grappling with the fact that he found himself *driving* a *car* through *Muggle London* with a *Muggle* and *Mudblood Lily Evans* just drove and drove, tuning out most of their conversation. Occasionally, he caught snippets — something about the music on the radio, a heated discussion about the fitness of certain band members—

And then:

"Oh, *him* — yeah, the tattoos really work for him," Evans remarked, her tone light.

Regulus didn't think much of it — until Marie-Anne cheerfully chimed in:

"Oh, you like tattoos? Well, you've seen Reg's new one then, right? On his left underarm—"

Every muscle in Regulus's body went rigid.

Deflect. Deflect.

Deflect *now*.

"Oh, look at that!" he blurted, pointing wildly out the window.

It didn't matter what he was pointing at — it could've been a lamppost for all he knew. The important thing was that it worked; Marie-Anne turned to look, and Regulus seized the opportunity to turn up the radio, drowning out all further conversation.

Marie-Anne and Evans exchanged startled glances but, to his relief, burst into laughter and started singing along to the music instead.

Regulus exhaled slowly — just another fifteen minutes and they'd arrive. Fifteen minutes of keeping all conversation away from precarious matters — that was doable.

And, in all honesty, the longer they drove, the more he found himself settling into it. He started to… *enjoy* it, in a strange way. The wind through the open windows, the steady hum of the car beneath his hands, the freedom of moving through Muggle London like it was the most normal thing in the world.

He probably wouldn't get the chance to drive a car again anytime soon, and by the time they reached their destination, he had grown almost comfortable.

He didn't even bother trying to maneuver into a proper parking spot — instead he just pulled up to the sidewalk, exhaling in relief as he yanked the handbrake and stepped out of the car.

Marie-Anne beamed as she slid into the driver's seat.

"Nice to meet you, Lily!" she chirped as Evans climbed out as well. She shot Regulus a grin. "Don't be a stranger, Reg!"

Before he could respond, she sped off, leaving him and Evans standing there.

A heavy, uncomfortable silence settled between them.

Regulus opened his mouth. Closed it. Evans opened her mouth. Closed it.

They blinked at each other.

Finally, Evans let out a quiet huff of laughter. "Alright, I'm just going to… err — thanks. For the ride, I guess?"

She turned to leave.

Regulus hesitated. "Err — Evans — could you not—"

She bit her lip, clearly stifling a laugh. "Tell anyone about you driving a car with a Muggle?"

Regulus scratched the back of his head. "Yeah. Something like that."

Evans stilled, her piercing green eyes raking over him, assessing.

"I don't think anyone would believe me," she admitted, as if the realisation had just dawned on her.

Regulus considered that – *fair*.

“Well,” she said, tilting her head. “Until September, I guess.”

She turned and walked away.

Regulus watched her go for a second or two before turning toward the nearest alleyway. He thought about the sheer ridiculousness of the past few hours.

He shook his head as he pulled his cloak from his pocket, realising that, for the first time in weeks, he hadn’t thought about any of it — not about Thorne, not about Davies, or Demir, or anyone or anything…

Odd — who would’ve thought that the first time he enjoyed something in weeks would involve a Muggle and a Mudblood?

With that thought, he drew his wand and summoned the Knight Bus.

Chapter 2: Of Refuge & Friends

Chapter Notes

> Wow, I was swept off my feet by the amount of comments you guys left at the prologue. Thank you so much, it is really motivating and you guys made my day. ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With the second half of the holidays came a newfound, deep appreciation for Regulus's friends and the forging of an unbreakable bond between them — a connection that felt uplifting, liberating and lifesaving in so many ways that Regulus couldn't even begin to decipher. He was positive that without his friends around, he might have not survived that summer.

These strong bonds and deeping loyalties, would, eventually, though, make his life more complicated, too — but that was a matter of months, years, and definitely something that Regulus didn't think about yet.

No, now, in the latter half of the holidays, Regulus was glad, relieved, to not be alone with his thoughts, not to stew in his feelings and memories, and instead lose himself in easy banter with his friends, playing games until late at night and waking up to the sound of Barty's booming laughter at one of Evan's ridiculous jokes.

Barty had managed to escape his mum and aunt in Germany and was staying with Evan for the remainder of the holidays, and with Evan easily coaxing his mother into allowing them to accompany Regulus, they'd taken refuge at Black Manor for the month leading up to the start of Hogwarts. They had claimed Sirius's old bedroom and Regulus was glad to realise that it didn't even sting. Sure, there were plenty of bedrooms to choose from, but they'd opted for the one next to Regulus's and apparently had a much better time sharing the king size bed than both claiming a room of their own — at least judged by the poorly stifled laughter and jokes that had woken Regulus more than once.

It wasn't just Evan and Barty who came over, though they were the only ones staying the night. More often than not, Mulciber and Avery joined them for drinks and late-night games, and even Dolohov and Lestrange stopped by a few times. And strangely enough, they turned

out to be decent company. They had toned down their usual rowdiness, making room for actually amusing banter and tread carefully whenever the conversation drifted toward women or their nightly escapades. More than that, they actually added to the discussion, sharing insights from their Ministry jobs and experiences in the magical world beyond Hogwarts. More important than that, they didn't say one word about Isa, for which Regulus was very glad.

Apparently, a shared sacrifice and killing the long-sought infiltrator earned him enough respect to make even Dolohov and Lestrange tolerable.

One evening in the second week of August wasn't much different – loud, chaotic and laced with laughter. They were in the drawing room where Barty and Dolohov were wrestling on the floor like a pair of unruly Muggles, limbs tangled as they grappled, knocking over a side table and sending a stool skidding across the rug. Avery was cheering them on and sent bursts of silver and gold sparks with his wand determining who was on the winning side.

Meanwhile, Evan was stubbornly attempting to play a tune on the piano, his off-key notes clashing horribly with the Wireless blaring overhead and Lestrange poured drinks with an easy flick of his wrist, entirely unbothered by the chaos. Regulus himself was in the middle of what he considered the most important task of all — relocating several plates of snacks, at least ten feet away from the wrestling match before they became collateral damage too.

That is, until a presence caught his attention.

His head snapped up to the sight of Isa.

She stood frozen in the doorway, clearly not expecting to walk into a room filled with seven blokes, least of all Dolohov and Lestrange.

None of the others had noticed her yet — until Barty, mid-struggle with Dolohov, caught sight of her and went still.

"Nott," he smirked, raising a lazy hand in greeting as if he weren't currently half-pinned to the floor.

One by one, the others turned to look, the lively atmosphere grinding to a halt as the room collectively froze.

Regulus could hardly blame them — he had nearly forgotten Isa had that effect on people. Now, after weeks without seeing her, he got a

glimpse of why others so often fell into momentary, dumbstruck awe at the sight of her. She was wearing a white summer dress, the colour contrasting nicely with the soft tan she'd undoubtedly acquired in the courtyard in Damascus. Her golden hair, usually woven into intricate braids, now fell loosely around her shoulders, framing her face in a way that made her look… different.

Regulus couldn't immediately place what had changed, but something had.

Isa lingered at the threshold, shifting slightly on her feet, her gaze flickering across the room. He could see the debate in her eyes — step forward, act unfazed, or retreat and return later? Seven pairs of male eyes on her likely didn't help her decision, though, to their credit, Dolohov and Lestrange made a visible effort not to stare, probably out of respect for him.

Regulus was the first to recover. Straightening, he subtly motioned for his friends to carry on before stepping toward Isa and guiding her out into the hallway.

The moment they were outside the room, she wrapped her arms around him in a hug. His chin rested perfectly atop her head, the familiar lavender-vanilla scent of her hair washing over him.

When they pulled apart, she offered a small smile. "Sorry… I didn't know you'd have so much company. I just wanted to pop by, say hi — let you know I'm back from Damascus."

Regulus shook his head, suppressing an awkward laugh at the realisation that at least this was a more favourable scene than the last one she had accidentally walked in on at Black Manor.

"It's alright," he said. "You're welcome to join."

Isa glanced back toward the drawing room, where Barty had resumed his wrestling match and Evan his atrocious attempt at playing the piano, but the others still flickered subtle glances toward the hall.

She turned back to Regulus, lips twitching. "Nah, thanks. I'll… pop by tomorrow instead. Noon?"

Regulus nodded. "Yeah, sure."

She hesitated, studying his face. "You've been doing okay?"

He shrugged, his eyes drifting to a meaningless spot on the wall behind her.

“You look okay,” she observed softly, still searching his face. “Like you’ve been… alright.”

He offered a small smile in return, but as he looked at her properly, his gaze traced the slight differences — the golden tint of her hair, the warmth in her brown eyes.

“You look nice,” he said, almost absently.

Isa quirked an eyebrow.

Regulus studied her a moment longer.

“There’s something different about you. What is it?”

Isa blinked, then let out a quiet laugh, raising another amused brow. “...I cut my hair.”

Ah — so that was it.

Regulus nodded. “Alright. You look nice.”

Isa bit her lip, trying not to laugh, though the confusion in her eyes was unmistakable.

“Alright, Reg,” she said slowly. “See you tomorrow.”

“Sure, Ies.”

*****

True to her word, Isa popped by the next day — though this time, with a surprise in the form of her two little sisters.

Regulus had barely stepped into the Entrance Hall before two small figures darted past Isa, their excitement reverberating through the space.

“Sorry,” Isa said, a bit sheepishly, as she made a half-hearted attempt to contain them. “They’ve been wanting to see you ever since…” She trailed off, her voice momentarily faltering as she steered metaphorically — and very pointedly — around the elephant in the room. Her gaze flickered away. “...you know, you popped by in Damascus.”

Regulus, equally eager to brush past the fact that he'd killed their former Professor in Isa's childhood home, turned to the two girls, who were currently bouncing up and down the grand staircase.

"That's alright," he said, his voice amused. "I think we've got enough to entertain you two, don't we?"

Ariadna planted her hands on her hips and gave him a sceptical look that was far too reminiscent of Isa. "Yes, well," she said, voice sharp and confident, "Isa told us there's a pond here we could swim in."

Regulus smirked, his eyes gleaming. "Oh, there is," he agreed. "But I have a better idea for now."

Isa shot him a wary look as he crouched slightly and whispered something into Ariadna's ear. The little girl's eyes widened, and then, before Isa could protest, Regulus straightened and said casually, "Second door to the right, alright?"

"Yes!" Ariadna let out enthusiastically, then turned on her heel. "C'mon, Elara, let's go!"

Regulus and Isa remained standing side by side at the foot of the stairs, watching as the two little blond heads disappeared up the stairs, then around the corner.

Isa crossed her arms, tilting her head at him. "What did you tell her to do?"

Regulus smirked. "Ah, you'll see soon enough."

A brief beat of silence. Then—

A loud, startled yelp from upstairs. Followed by another.

Then came the unmistakable sounds of chaos — thudding footsteps, scrambling, the distinct creak of a bed being jumped on, and an alarmingly high-pitched shriek that was, without a doubt, Evan.

Isa clapped a hand over her mouth, but it was no use — laughter burst out of her, bright and unrestrained. "They slept here?" she managed between laughs.

Regulus, very pleased with himself, leaned against the banister with a smirk. "They've been here for almost two weeks now."

More noise from upstairs — a mixture of panicked shouts and muffled

giggles. Then Barty's voice rang out, breathless but amused: "Oh lord, you are Nott's little sisters, aren't you?"

Ariadna's response came in the form of an excited battle cry.

"Attack! Attack!"

*****

As promised, they spent most of the day by the pond, letting Isa's sisters enjoy the warmth of the British sun — probably a welcome change from the relentless Syrian heat they had been subjected to for weeks. The water glistened under the light, a lazy summer breeze rustling the trees, and the air smelled of grass, lake water, and the fresh berries that Whiskerley had dutifully arranged on a blanket alongside sandwiches and chilled drinks.

Unsurprisingly, Barty was the first to strip down to his swimming trunks and immediately engaged in an enthusiastic game of chase, bounding after Ariadna en Elara purposefully slowly, letting them think they were just a tad faster before he suddenly lunged. Ariadna let out a shriek as he caught her around the waist, hoisting her into the air before dramatically tossing her into the water. She resurfaced a second later, spitting out pond water and yelling about her planned revenge.

Evan and Regulus sat on the blanket, watching the chaos unfold. Isa stood a few feet away on the grass, arms loosely crossed, laughing as Barty scooped up Elara next, giggling breathlessly as she was unceremoniously thrown in after her sister.

"Who would've thought Crouch would be good with kids?" Isa mused

Evan snorted.

Regulus could practically hear his thoughts — obviously, Barty was brilliant with kids. He was still practically one himself.

Isa shook her head with a smile, watching her sisters chase after Barty through the water. Then, without much fanfare, she reached for the hem of her summer dress, plucking at the light fabric as she prepared to lift it over her head.

Regulus's gaze snapped to her. So did Evan's.

Regulus's brow furrowed. "What are you doing, Nott?"

Isa glanced at him, baffled. “Well, I’m going for a swim, obviously.”

Regulus said nothing for a moment, but his brain was already running the calculations. He might not have had extensive experience with Isa’s underwear, but the few times he had had been enough to conclude that whatever she was wearing under that dress was *not* meant for Evan and Barty’s viewing pleasure.

“I’m sure there’s a bathing suit in Cissy’s old room,” he said flatly.

Isa blinked, realisation dawning in her eyes. She tilted her head, expression shifting from confusion to incredulity as she studied him.

Regulus didn’t budge, though – his gaze remained steady, firm, unwavering.

Isa let out a loud groan. Then, with a slow shake of her head — both exasperated and mildly amused — she turned and walked toward the house.

The moment she was out of earshot, Evan let out a barely restrained snicker.

Regulus turned to him with a withering look before punching him lightly in the arm. “Shut up.”

Evan just sniggered some more. “Didn’t say a word, mate.”

Silence settled between them as they turned their attention back to the pond, where Barty was now letting himself be playfully shoved underwater by Isa’s sisters. The girls cackled as he resurfaced, shaking his hair like a wet dog before launching another exaggerated chase after Ariadna.

Regulus watched, then spoke carefully, keeping his eyes on the water. “How’s his mum?”

Evan coughed, shifting slightly where he sat. “Not great.” His voice was casual, but there was an edge to it — something guarded.

Regulus hesitated, then pressed. “She’s actually with her sister in Germany?”

Evan exhaled through his nose, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah — but… she’s had some episodes.”

Regulus finally turned to look at him, brows knitting together. “Like…

what?”

Evan hesitated. His fingers picked at a loose thread on the blanket. “I know they’ve… plucked her off the street at night at least twice.” He flinched as he said it, gaze flickering but never quite meeting Regulus’s. After a beat, he added, voice lower, “He didn’t give me loads of details, but I know he’s spent multiple nights chasing after her.”

Regulus swallowed, his stomach twisting. “They couldn’t…” He exhaled, still thinking. “I don’t know — call someone to help?”

Evan let out a humourless chuckle, dark and dry. “And have word get out that Mr. Crouch Sr.’s wife has gone completely spare?” He shook his head. “If they’d called the Aurors in to look for her… And his dad wasn’t even there.” A scoff. “Had already returned to London because, well, everything else happening.”

Regulus glanced back toward the pond, where Barty was now floating lazily on his back while Elara splashed at him with tiny, determined hands. He truly looked like he didn’t have a care in the world.

Regulus lowered his voice. “How’s he been holding up?”

Evan shrugged. “I think we’re forming enough of a distraction for him.”

Regulus considered this, then sighed. “You think there’s something we could… do?”

Evan snorted, smirking as he leaned back on his elbows. “Besides pranks and liquor? Don’t think so.”

“That,” he said, voice dry, “we can take care of.”

Before Evan could reply, movement from the house caught both their attention. Isa was stepping back outside, now dressed in a swimsuit — definitely the most revealing she could find, but Regulus knew a lost battle when he saw one.

Evan stretched lazily, rolling his shoulders before tugging off his shirt and tossing it onto the blanket. “Well, let’s go,” he said, standing and tilting his head toward the water.

Regulus hesitated.

It was hot. He wanted to swim. But then there was the question of his clothes — more specifically, his shirt, the long-sleeved fabric safely concealing his scarred back.

He was still weighing his options when he felt Isa's presence behind him. She crouched down, plucking a drink from the ground, and, without looking at him, murmured low enough for only him to hear, "Take it off, Reg. No one cares." She paused, and then, softer, "If they even notice at all."

Regulus exhaled sharply, feeling both foolish and oddly reassured.

With a sigh, he pulled his shirt over his head in one fluid motion, jaw tightening as the warm air hit his skin.

It was then that Regulus realised he'd been an idiot — of course his friends wouldn't pay attention to the scars on his back; the only thing that mattered now was the Mark, stark and unmistakable against his forearm.

A short silence.

Regulus pretended not to see the way Isa's gaze flickered to it before shifting away. Evan's, though — his stare lingered.

Evan's face remained still, his eyes flickering with something sharp and something impressed.

Regulus said nothing, avoiding his eyes and instead calmly tucking his wand into the waistband of his swim trunks. Then he met Evan's gaze, holding it.

A beat.

Evan nodded, slow.

Regulus nodded back.

Then, without another word, they turned and made their way to the water.

*****

It wasn't just Regulus's friendship with Barty and Evan that deepened over the summer — it was Isa's, too.

She'd known them for years, of course. They'd sat together at the

Slytherin table, shared classes and considered each other friends, probably mostly in some vague, incidental way. That changed in those last weeks of summer — something shifted, their dynamic solidifying into something new; stronger and real.

It was practically sealed already after that first evening.

After dropping her sisters off at home, Isa had returned, eager to escape her family and trade it for the rowdy chaos of Black Manor. Mulciber and Avery stopped by as well, although, as always, they didn't stay the night.

Regulus and Evan were engaged in a lazy game of Exploding Snap at the corner table, cards flashing between their fingers as they played, while Mulciber and Avery were running experimental spells on a pile of cushions. And Barty and Isa — Merlin knew how or why — had somehow ended up in an arm-wrestling match.

Evan, watching them with mild amusement, snorted. "Those two really match each other's energy, don't they?"

Regulus hummed in agreement, keeping an eye on them from his spot at the table.

Isa had her jaw clenched, her brown eyes fierce and determined, her fingers locked around Barty's hand as she slowly but surely gained the upper hand, pressing his arm lower and lower. Barty had that mischievous glint in his eyes, letting her think she had him — until the very last moment.

Then, with a sharp flick of his wrist, he slammed her hand against the table.

Isa gaped at him, outraged. "That's *vile* , Crouch!"

Barty laughed. "Oh, you actually thought you were gonna win?" He shook his head, smug. "Adorable."

Isa didn't hesitate — she grabbed a leftover drumstick from her plate and hurled it at his face.

Barty barely ducked in time, then scrambled away with a yelp, dodging another projectile. He eventually slid into the seat next to Regulus and Evan, grinning but slightly out of breath.

"Shit," he whispered, rubbing his wrist. "The girl's stronger than she

looks. Wouldn't want to get squared in the face by her."

Regulus, who had been on the receiving end of Isa's slaps more than once, nodded in sincere agreement.

The night stretched on and eventually, they all ended up sprawled across the sofas, talking about Hogwarts.

Barty smirked, swirling his drink. "Evan and I have got a fantastic list of spells to try on the first-years."

Isa snorted. "Just hand in your Prefect badge already, will you?"

Barty let out an unapologetic howl of laughter.

Then, Mulciber turned to Regulus. "Speaking of badges… you got your captain's badge, right?"

Barty clapped Regulus on the back. "Of course he did — our very own Quidditch star."

Evan stretched lazily. "Do we know who the other captains are?"

Regulus had no clue about Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff, but Gryffindor… well. That one was so obvious even Selwyn could get it right.

Evan seemed to read his mind, voice dipping slightly. "Well, I think we all know who Gryffindor's captain is."

"Potter," Avery supplied.

Regulus pointedly didn't look at Isa.

Mulciber shook his head. "We have to win this year. Imagine taking the Cup in Potter's last season. That'd be perfect."

Regulus swallowed hard, throat suddenly dry, as he thought about the absurdity of the fact that little over a month ago he'd spent the night here with James, told him he'd loved him, with James still inside him, breathless, sweat-damp, pressing kissing into his neck.

God. If his friends only knew…

Luckily, Evan changed the subject, sensing Regulus's hesitation of discussing James — probably thinking it had to do with James's connection to Sirius, not his very solid connection to Regulus himself.

“So, sixth year,” Evan said casually, stretching out his legs. “Gonna be nice. Loads of free periods.”

Mulciber shrugged. “Depends on your subjects. How’d you lot do on OWLs?”

Barty and Evan exchanged a knowing look, smirking.

“We did alright,” Barty said, far too satisfied with himself.

Then Evan turned to Regulus and Isa. “I’m sure these two did more than ‘alright’, though,” he smirked, nodding at them.

Avery laughed, glancing at Regulus. “Oh, yes — what’s the verdict? Most Outstandings Hogwarts has ever seen?”

Regulus snorted and tilted his head toward Isa. “She beat me, didn’t she?”

Evan blinked. “Impossible. Didn’t you get… like, nine Outstandings or something?”

Regulus smiled, glancing at Isa. “Ten, actually.”

Isa groaned.

“But *swot Nott* here got eleven.” Regulus continued, nudging her. “Took one subject more than me.”

Mulciber and Avery gawked, completely perplexed, while Barty and Evan burst into incredulous laughter. Isa, meanwhile, looked mortified.

“You *tosser*,” she muttered, shoving Regulus.

Regulus just laughed, pride flickering across his eyes.

*****

Later, Mulciber and Avery headed home through the fireplace, leaving Regulus, Barty, Evan and Isa lounging in the dimly lit, messy drawing room.

Barty let out a wide yawn, stretching his arms behind his head. Across from him, Isa was already half-asleep, her head resting against Regulus’s shoulder, eyes fluttering shut.

Evan nodded, pushing himself to his feet. “Alright, let’s go to bed before she passes out right here.”

Everyone rose, Barty and Evan making their way toward Sirius’s old room, sniggering as they disappeared down the hall. Regulus turned toward his own bedroom, expecting Isa to follow. But when he reached the doorway, he noticed she was still lingering in the hallway, shifting on her feet.

He frowned slightly. “You coming?”

Isa hesitated, running a hand over her arm. “It won’t be… weird, right?”

Regulus blinked, caught off guard.

And then, the realisation hit him.

The last time they’d consciously shared a bed, it had been the one in his dorm. And well, they’d done a lot more than sleeping there.

His body stiffened, discomfort creeping in.

And then, just as quickly, another thought struck him — one that made him even more uneasy. The last person to sleep next to him in that bed had been James.

Isa had walked in on them, had seen them and probably thought of it just now, too.

He exhaled slowly. “Well… it doesn’t have to be weird,” he said, though he was fairly sure she had, in fact, *made* it weird. “But if you’d rather sleep in Cissy’s old room—”

Isa’s lips quirked, something soft in her expression. “No, no,” she said easily. “You’re right.”

Regulus nodded, and a few minutes later, they stood side by side in the bathroom adjacent to his bedroom, brushing their teeth in companionable silence.

It wasn’t until they’d crawled into bed — him on his back, staring at the ceiling, Isa on her side, hugging a pillow — that another realisation struck him.

In all the discomfort and the thought about him and Isa, and him and James, he had totally forgotten about another, way more valid reason

for her not to sleep next to him.

His nightmares.

His stomach clenched. *Fuck*.

He was sure he didn't scream — he hadn't woken himself up, something he used to do when the nightmares were worse. But he definitely turned, tossed, sweated.

His jaw tightened — he could hardly send her away now. It would only draw attention to it, would make her worry, would bring out those sad, knowing eyes.

No, better to wait until she fell asleep, cast a Silencing Charm just in case, and hope for the best.

*****

When Regulus woke, the bed beside him was empty. It wasn't unusual — in all the holidays they'd spent together, Isa always did her own thing in the mornings, either reading somewhere or already having breakfast — so he didn't think much of it as he got out of bed, threw on some summer Muggle clothes, and made his way downstairs.

It wasn't until he was halfway through his first cup of coffee that he realised he hadn't seen her yet.

Frowning, he checked the usual places — the drawing room, the dining room. The garden doors were still locked…

A flicker of unease crept in.

He made his way up the first floor, peering into Cissy's old bedroom — empty. The library — empty. By the time he reached the second floor, he was properly confused. The dusty guest rooms were untouched, Uncle Alphard's old room was just as it always was.

There was only one explanation.

She had left the house through the fireplace.

A strange tightness settled in his chest as he turned back toward the stairs, deciding to head to the kitchen and ask Whiskerley if she knew anything.

But as he passed by Sirius's old bedroom, something made him pause.

He had no idea why, had no real reason to check — and yet, without thinking, he slowly pushed the door open, wincing at the creak of the hinges.

And then he saw them.

Isa, curled up in the middle of the bed, one arm tucked under her head, her hair spilling across the pillow. Barty was sprawled on his stomach, one leg dangling off the edge of the bed, his face half-buried in the mattress. Evan, on the other side of Isa, was on his back, one arm flung over his eyes, his slow, steady breathing the only sound in the room.

For a second, Regulus just stared.

Then he burst out laughing.

The sound was enough to stir the boys. Barty cracked one eye open, groggy but smug, gaze flickering from Isa — almost pressed against him — to Regulus.

“Ah,” Barty drawled, voice thick with sleep. “Black. Your girl slept next to us last night.”

Evan yawned, sitting up and raking a hand through his hair. “Apparently, you move too much in your sleep,” he said. “Pushed her out of the bed. Twice.”

Regulus felt his throat go dry.

He forced a laugh, hoping it sounded sincere.

Evan stretched, cracking his neck. “C’mon, Barty,” he said, nudging him. “Let’s get breakfast so the girl can sleep.”

*****

“So the nightmares are back.”

Regulus snapped his head up, met by the sight of Isa settling down next to him on the grass. Barty and Evan were floating lazily in the pond, their laughter bouncing over the water.

He didn’t look at her, just gave a small nod. “Yeah.”

“They were gone for so long.” Her voice was quiet, searching.

Regulus only nodded again, still avoiding her gaze. Then he lay down on his back, staring up at the sky.

Isa followed suit, but positioned herself slightly higher, propping her head up with her arm. A moment later, her fingers slipped into his curls, sifting through them in that familiar way.

His eyes fluttered shut, a soft hum escaping him. The feeling of her hands in his hair was, as always, divine.

“There’s still a lot of potions left,” Isa said softly, her fingers tracing soothing patterns against his scalp. “From the stashes I made when you didn’t need them anymore.”

Regulus exhaled slowly, thinking back to the potions Isa had brewed while he was at Beauxbatons but didn’t need them anymore.

Isa must have been thinking the same.

He felt her tilt her head slightly. His eyes were still closed, focused only on the sensation of her fingers stroking his hair, when she asked, “Why did they stop at Beauxbatons?”

His body tensed.

He knew the answer to the question, of course, but didn’t want to answer the question in the slightest — not out loud, not to Isa, anyway. No, the truth was entirely too embarrassing and cheesy to share.

Subtly, he turned his face into her side, hoping to mask the shift in his expression. Isa, though, was too sharp.

She paused, and a beat later, let out an incredulous laugh.

“It was because of Potter, wasn’t it?”

Regulus groaned.

Isa’s laughter grew, rich with amusement. Then, suddenly, she stopped.

“Where did you sleep at Beauxbatons?”

Regulus stayed silent.

Isa shifted, moving away just enough to force eye contact as he

opened his eyes. Her gaze locked onto his, all-knowing and relentless.

“You shared a dorm with him, didn’t you?”

A reluctant sigh.

Isa laughed, throwing her head back. “Oh, God. Someone must’ve really wanted you two to—”

Regulus snorted.

Still laughing, Isa reached out and ruffled his curls.

Then, silence fell between them — not awkward or uncomfortable, but heavy nonetheless.

Isa’s fingers stilled in his hair, her voice quieter now. “I’m so sorry, Reg,” she murmured. “That… everything is this way.”

Regulus swallowed, closing his eyes again. Slowly, he lay back, facing the sky.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

> I am aware that everyone must've grown used to big things happening every chapter (including plot twists and whatnot), so compared to that this is more of a slow/filling chapter. Nothing I do is random, though, and the chapter is def important for world building/layering that will all fall into place at some point, as it always does ;)
>
> Next chapters are more eventful though.
>
> As always, excited to hear your thoughts.

Chapter 3: Of Duelling & Surveillance

Chapter Notes

> Can I just say that I was so thankful for all your comments. You made my day (several days, actually). I wanted this chapter out earlier, but alas. It is a longer one than usual, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rest of the holidays was relatively uneventful — at least until the last few days. He spent most days with Isa, Barty and Evan, and Regulus had a distinct feeling that some strings had been pulled after what had happened in Damascus; surely Evan, and thus Barty by extension, wouldn't have been allowed to stay at Black Manor for over a month if not for some behind-the-scenes meddling by Cissy's mother — Evan's aunt. And surely Isa's parents turned a blind eye and let their daughter stay all these nights because people had spoken to Mr. Nott — Lucius, through Cissy, or perhaps even Ms. Nott, knowing what had happened and perhaps not all too uneager to nudge her daughter closer to the youngest Revolutionary.

The youngest, and now one of the most distinguished, too.

After all, Regulus had identified the spy everyone had been searching for — and killed him. It was a strange phenomenon — how something so horrifying had made him gain respect.

He saw it in the eyes of Dolohov and Lestrange — two years his senior, yet now subtly looking to him, asking for his opinion, his advice, regularly stopping by at Black Manor and — strangely enough — actually respecting his boundaries. They'd even managed to behave like perfect gentlemen when they stumbled upon Isa — definitely tipsy — dancing with Evan in the drawing room and smoking one of those vile cigarettes she'd secretly bought in the souk in Damascus. Before, they would've undressed her with their eyes, would have tossed out innuendos, fantasised about her aloud; now, they'd quickly averted their gazes, turned to Regulus and carried on with their conversation.

His newly gained respect wasn't limited to those involved in the Revolution, though — also his closest friends, who had no idea what he did or had done, eyed the Mark on his arms with admiration and pride.

Every article in the Prophet, every abstract political discussion, every half-formed philosophical thought about war and ideology — somehow, it all came back to him, as if the Mark had not only inked his skin but stamped wisdom into his mind.

Regulus snorted at the thought.

No — so far, the Mark on his arm hadn't come with wisdom. It had come with sleepless, sweat-drenched nights; the good ones where he could only hear Thorne's voice, the bad ones where he saw the girl in the basement, Davies's words twisting in his head — *how they raped her*. The light leaving Demir's eyes. The hammering of his heart as he sped through Bellatrix's private fireplace.

He did his best, though — to see pride in it.

And he *was* proud. He was the youngest Revolutionary. One of the twelve initial supporters — like the twelve disciples, with one, of course, betraying them all. And Regulus, Regulus had killed him — identified the spy and gotten rid of him. Even better, the spy had *wanted* it, had *asked* for him to kill him. It had been both an act of necessity and, in some way, compassion.

And it *was* thrilling — thrilling to be part of it from the start, to be at the front lines from the beginning, to be at the helm of those changing the course of history. To be one of the people that the history books would talk about. Yes, all of it was thrilling and humbling and empowering at the same time; it was just that lately, he had to actively remind himself of it more often. Had to go back to the essence; the reason why they were fighting, why there was a war.

Survival. Existence. Liberation.

And to be handed a chance to be part of that, to be the one setting it in motion, to free the magical world from Minchum's oppressive reign, to restore the traditions they were meant to uphold — oh, that was *amazing*.

Not that he had done much for the Revolution over the summer, though — he wasn't sure if they were going easy on him because Cissy had demanded it or if it was simply because school was out. His domain was Hogwarts, after all, and school wouldn't start until September.

Truly the only thing he'd done all summer regarding the cause was taking Apparition lessons from Cissy. She hadn't told him why — had

said she didn't know, but Regulus had an inkling she knew better than anyone what was happening and why, but that she was ordered not to say. So, several times a week, Cissy would come over, they'd slip past the estate's wards, and she'd teach him to Apparate. Regulus was a quick learner and it took only little over a week to do it — without splinching, even. He wouldn't turn of age until around Easter, so what he was doing was definitely illegal, but then again — he'd done worse.

Cissy was ecstatic that they had pulled it off so quickly, but Regulus knew that at better times, he'd probably have needed a lesson or two, not five or six. His mind had grown weak, probably from fatigue. Cissy, of course, had used the lessons as an excuse to check in on him and Regulus, in turn, had used them to pretend everything was fine, wonderful even, but well — it was a big, fat lie.

The biggest problem was sleep, or lack thereof. He tried to stretch the nights as long as possible, subtly encouraging everyone to stay up with him in the drawing room, but, of course, eventually, people went to bed.

And alone, in the deepest, darkest hour of the night, his demons came to visit.

They whispered in his ears. Forced his eyes to see them, his hands to feel them, his senses to *smell* them. Their faces blurred, shifted, transformed, only to snap back — Thorne. Demir. Davies. The woman in the basement. Bellatrix. His governor. A queue of ghosts, lining up to torment him, to make him sweat and shudder in the deepest darkness of his soul.

He knew Isa wanted to stay close, sleep on the floor if he let her, but he preferred sleeping alone. Having Isa around, her sharp eyes not missing a thing while he was sweating, thrashing, screaming, possibly crying in his sleep — no, only the thought of her witnessing that made his stomach churn.

So, every night, she went to Sirius's old bedroom, unable to completely hide the concern in her eyes, and slept next to Barty and Evan, because she hated sleeping alone these days. Evan and Barty were delighted of course, to have the pretty girl sleeping between them and practically turned it into a competition to see who could make her laugh the loudest at their ridiculous jokes. Regulus always felt a sting of something when he heard her howling laughter echo through the walls — a warmth at the sound of his best friend laughing, while at the same time wondering if he himself would ever

laugh that unrestrained and sincere ever again.

Truly the only upside of it all was that at least his mind was too preoccupied with everything to think about James. But sometimes a thought slipped through, or a flash of memory resurfaced — the image of James snatching a cookie out of Regulus's hands with a teasing smirk, or the feeling of his back against his stomach in the bathtub, or the whispered words in his ear, when he had moved deep inside him — *oh, you feel divine, Reg.*

The memories always came unbidden, so intense that they made him react physically — a jolt or a sharp shudder, and always followed by a deep ache of longing; the insatiable desire to hear his laugh, to feel his hands, to taste his lips. Just these fleeting flashes made him choke, his throat dry, his heart aching — he was certain that an entire summer filled with them would have killed him.

Apart from the nights and the rare memories of James, Regulus managed; there was always enough buzz to keep him distracted and entertained. The sunny days were mostly spent around the pond; swimming, drifting off in the sun, reading and laughing at his friends' antics. The cloudy or rainy days were mostly spent inside, playing exploding snap or chess in the drawing room, playing a ridiculous tune on the piano as requested by Isa, or, as of lately, listening to Barty play the guitar.

They'd found the thing hidden in Sirius's old bedroom — probably a secret gift from Uncle Alphard — and Barty had immediately made it his mission to learn.

Surprisingly, he turned out to be a natural.

It took him only a few days to get the hang of it, much to Isa's delight, and soon, they were making up absurd songs together — Isa spouting nonsense lyrics while Barty strummed along.

Perhaps the best moment of all, though, was Isa's completely dumbstruck expression when Evan started singing. Most people didn't know that Evan could sing — unless they shared a dorm with him and had the misfortune of hearing him every morning. The downside of this new discovery, however, was that Regulus now had to endure the unholy combination of Evan and Isa duetting, Barty enthusiastically accompanying them on guitar, and, worst of all, their occasional attempts to drag him into it — manipulating him into joining in on the piano.

It was then a welcome fact that Evan and Barty continued their duelling club from Hogwarts; they spend hours testing new spells and jinxes, facing each other in impromptu duels and sifting through the many books that the Black Manor library had to offer on the subject, often with Isa on their side, who had joined their club too. Avery and Mulciber also joined whenever they were around, more of than not transforming the drawing room into a lively duelling arena.

One late afternoon in the last week of the holidays, however, the drawing room was unusually peaceful — no duelling or flying jinxes, no dancing or music. Barty and Evan lounged on the sofas, engaged in a half-hearted debate over the fittest Hufflepuff girls. Isa sat at the table, devouring a plate of éclairs, while Regulus flipped through his stack of Exploding Snap cards from his seat by the fireplace.

He should have known the quiet wouldn't last.

Suddenly, the legs of his chair vanished beneath him. Regulus barely had time to react before he tumbled backward, cards flying from his hands. The impact knocked the breath from his lungs, and before he could blink, a familiar, deep-throated laughter rang through the room — a laugh he hadn't heard in weeks.

Regulus snapped his head around. Yaxley stood in the doorway, smirking, his wand still lazily pointed at where the chair had stood. Lucius stood beside him, barely containing his amusement.

Regulus was quick to recover and pushed himself up before, without hesitation, flicking his wand — sending a retaliatory hex straight at Yaxley.

Unfortunately, Yaxley was faster; he deflected the hex with a casual wave of his wand, his smirk growing wider. "Oh, come now, Black. That was predictable."

Regulus said nothing and instead stepped forward, wand raised, body in a perfect duelling stance. Yaxley mirrored him, his eyes laced with mischief and amusement.

And just like that, the duel began.

Yaxley opened with a nonverbal jinx, aiming to trip Regulus up. Regulus countered with a precise shield charm, before immediately launching a sharp-cutting hex. Yaxley dodged, sending a stunning spell in return. Regulus ducked, rolling to the side, and sent a disarming spell. Yaxley blocked it effortlessly, his movements almost

lazy — but his eyes sharp, testing, gauging.

Regulus's form was flawless, though, and his focus sharp. His knack for duelling was one of the things he, like Sirius, was glad he had inherited from his father. Sure, Mother was a fine dueller too, but it was Father whose wand flipped and flicked quicker than most people could think. An impressive feature, even more so considering Father's perfectly collected, almost absent demeanour while twisting his wand.

So, like Father, Regulus's spells were precise, his blocks measured, his stance instinctive and strong — but Yaxley's reflexes were honed by experience rather than raw talent.

The room had fallen silent — Barty and Evan leaned forward, their expressions eager, their gazes flicking between the duellists in utter excitement. Isa had, wisely so, abandoned her plate and risen from her chair, leaning against the fireplace, arms crossed, sharp eyes tracking every movement.

Then—

A sudden crack echoed through the room as Whiskerley appeared out of nowhere, holding a silver tray of fresh tea.

Regulus flinched — just for a moment, but it was enough. Yaxley seized the opportunity and with a quick, fluid motion, he cast a disarming spell, sending Regulus's wand flying into Yaxley's waiting hand.

Regulus sighed.

Fuck.

He'd really wanted to win — to disarm Yaxley here, in front of his friends. In front of Isa.

Yaxley twirled the wand between his fingers, smug satisfaction gleaming in his eyes. "Well, well," he drawled, stepping forward and offering the wand back. "The rumours are true. You *are* an excellent duellist."

Regulus took his wand from him, ignoring the heat in his face at both Yaxley's praise and his own frustration. "You could have warned me."

Yaxley chuckled, tucking his wand away. "Where's the fun in that?"

Evan and Barty sniggered, exchanging glances. Isa, however, remained still, offering only a small, composed smile.

"If you hadn't been distracted by your House Elf," Yaxley continued, still grinning, "we could've gone on for quite some time."

From her place by the fireplace, Isa exhaled lightly. "You should focus on his left backside. That's his weak spot."

Yaxley arched a brow in amusement, but Isa was already turning to Regulus. "And you should focus on his right front. That's clearly his."

Lucius let out a soft chuckle, observing the exchange with evident interest.

"Well, well," Yaxley drawled, his eyes twinkling. "Someone has a sharp eye for dueling."

Isa met his gaze with her usual poise, unimpressed. "Obviously."

Evan, practically buzzing from Lucius and Yaxley's presence, took the opportunity to interject. "We practice duelling a lot."

Yaxley's smirk widened slightly, his gaze sweeping over Isa. "All of you?"

Isa arched a brow. "Yes."

Yaxley tilted his head, a silent challenge flickering in his expression. He briefly pressed his tongue between his teeth before speaking.

"Well," he said, "may I have the honour, Miss Nott?"

Isa's sharp eyes flickered. A faint blush crept up her neck, but her face remained composed. Regulus recognised that glint in her eyes — the glint of challenge, the urge to prove herself.

It was that Regulus knew that she wouldn't talk to him for weeks if he intervened — otherwise he would have pressed her to pass on the offer.

"Yes," she said unfazed. "You may."

Barty and Evan straightened, repositioning themselves eagerly to watch. Lucius gave a small wave of his wand, shifting the furniture aside with effortless elegance.

Isa and Yaxley bowed.

Isa was composed, sharp — perhaps a little stiff. Yaxley, by contrast, looked positively wicked, his smirk deepening.

Then, the room burst into motion.

Isa was fast, sharp like Regulus was used to. Her spells were precise and determined, yet her movements light and fluid, even elegant in some way. Yaxley, however, had the advantage of experience; he was stronger, steadier, blocking her hexes smoothly and countering with careful strikes to push her, to test how far she could go.

Regulus was definitely impressed how long she held her ground, and could tell the rest was, too — Barty and Evan looked at the scene in awe, Lucius nodded approvingly as Isa twirled and shielded, and recast. Isa had always been a good dueller — also inherited from her father — but it was clear that she had improved over the summer. At some point, Regulus's jaw almost dropped when it seemed like she might actually have the upper hand. But then, something made her hesitate, just a flicker — and Yaxley seized the opening.

His spell hit her squarely in the chest, disarming her. The force knocked her slightly off balance, and she stumbled—

Just as Yaxley stepped forward, catching her before she could hit the ground.

His arm wrapped around her waist, the other hand gripping her wrist. Her hair had fallen slightly out of place, brushing against his shoulder.

The room exhaled.

Barty and Evan exchanged wicked glances, though Regulus didn't miss the way Evan's eyes flicked toward him, watching his reaction.

Regulus forced himself to remain still, unfazed, although it was a hard task.

Yaxley's expression shifted, his smirk softening into something darker as he looked down at Isa.

A beat passed before he finally released her, stepping back. He handed her wand back with a smug wink.

"Well, Nott," he mused, his eyes glinting. His voice was sincere. "Very

impressive — for a girl."

Isa scowled.

Funny, how a genuine compliment from one could be nothing short of an insult to the other.

Her offense went unnoticed by the rest as they all turned to Lucius when he coughed, then spoke.

“Regulus,” he said smoothly, his voice gentle. “Can we have a word?”

The shift in atmosphere was immediate.

Barty and Evan tensed, about to move, but Lucius raised a hand. “Oh no, stay where you are. We’ll just take a quick stroll.”

Instantly, Regulus felt the anticipation burning through him — what could possibly be important enough to discuss for them to visit? It was undoubtedly related to the Revolution; a new task, maybe. Or did it concern Thorne?

Regulus’s stomach churned, but he forced himself to shrug off the whirlwind of thoughts and nodded. He followed Lucius and Yaxley out of the room, acutely aware of the three pairs of curious eyes burning in his back as he moved. He didn’t look at them.

Outside, Lucius cut to the chase immediately. This was a very fortunate thing, because Regulus had a hard time suppressing the weird mix of exhilarating anticipation and nauseating nervosity coursing through him as they walked onto the grounds.

“There’s a meeting tonight,” Lucius explained. “Eight o’clock.”

Regulus nodded.

The first meeting — his first meeting after the inauguration. The first meeting after killing Thorne. The first time he’d face all the people he had seen in the aftermath.

God, it was a good thing they’d informed him so last minute. He would’ve slept even worse than he already did if he’d known earlier.

Still, he had an inkling that this hardly needed an official invitation from both Lucius and Yaxley; normally it was Cissy who kept him informed.

Yaxley smirked, plucking a leaf from a bush as they walked past. "We've got something a bit more thrilling in mind, too."

Regulus glanced at him, intrigued.

"How about joining me for some… field work?"

"…Field work?" Regulus echoed, wary.

What the hell was *that* supposed to mean?

Lucius spoke before Yaxley could. "Given everything happening in Damascus, and considering you've lost one of your most valuable connections for… *your role* in all of this, we thought—"

"—It'd be refreshing," Yaxley cut in, smirking. "And, frankly, just plain fun."

Lucius inclined his head. "It would give you a broader understanding of what others do. A glimpse into what your future might entail."

Yaxley's smirk widened. "Think of it as a gift before you return to Hogwarts. Something exciting."

Regulus considered this. It *did* sound… interesting.

"Alright," he said slowly. "I'm in."

Yaxley let out a victorious laugh and clapped Regulus on the back. "Knew you would be."

Regulus arched a brow. "And what exactly is this 'field work'?"

"Nothing too strenuous," Lucius assured him. "Surveillance."

Regulus frowned slightly.

"There are certain locations — posts, safe houses, strongholds — that require protection," Lucius explained. "They're kept hidden from most, but we prefer to keep watch regardless."

"And who knows," Yaxley added, voice laced with anticipation, "maybe we'll get lucky and some modernist filth will stumble in. Wouldn't that be a thrill?"

"Unlikely," Lucius said pointedly. "But yes, it'll give you a clearer picture of the work being done outside the meetings."

Regulus nodded, eager now.

Finally, he would see what the others were doing. What their tasks for the Revolution entailed.

Oh, Barty and Evan would die from jealousy knowing that he got to accompany Yaxley on a mission.

Unrestrained, utter excitement washed over him.

“When?” he asked, unable to hide the anticipation in his voice.

Lucius smiled, his eyes twinkling in amusement. “Tomorrow night,” he said.

“Wear something practical,” Yaxley added. “No stiff robes.”

Regulus nodded again.

*****

When Regulus re-entered the house, he didn’t say anything about his meeting or Yaxley’s ‘field’ work, and they were smart enough not to ask. He felt the changed atmosphere, though; when he entered the drawing room, the conversation between them halted instantly. Three pairs of eyes turned to him, their gazes curious and assessing. Regulus pretended not to notice, not to grow immensely self-conscious under their looks.

Subconsciously, his right hand drifted over the Mark. The movement was small, barely perceptible, but Barty caught it. His eyes flickered with something close to eagerness.

It was Isa who finally broke the silence, picking up the conversation as if nothing had happened. Regulus only half chipped in, thinking about the meeting that night, how he was going to get away from Black Manor preferably unseen, and what Yaxley’s field work might have in store for him.

He knew it’d be almost impossible to escape Black Manor without his friends knowing – they practically lived with him now and were accustomed to his company until late at night. The only moments he had been gone was during Cissy’s Apparition lessons and the two times he went to visit the bookstore — or well, actually, Marie-Anne — in Muggle London. No, any absence, especially after that meeting with Lucius and Yaxley, would not go unnoticed.

Dinner passed as usual, filled with banter and the occasional jab at one other, and Regulus decided to just roll with it — yes, his friends weren't supposed to know anything about anything, but they were obviously on their side; even more so, they'd kill for a spot at that table, which they would undoubtedly do anytime soon. He'd leave, offer no explanation, and they'd understand well enough what it was related to.

With that thought, he excused himself, rising from the table with a quiet nod before slipping out of the dining room. He made his way upstairs, pushing open the door to his bedroom and shutting it behind him. Only then did he let out a slow breath.

He wondered who would be there tonight. Was this a routine meeting, or something more? Had they gathered throughout the summer while he'd been left out of the loop? Had Cissy interfered — keeping him at a distance, deciding it was better for him to have some time off?

The thought of it made his stomach turn. The idea of being the schoolboy who needed shielding, needed time — it made him positively nauseous with shame.

He shook off the feeling and crossed the room, stripping off his shirt before moving to his wardrobe, fingers brushing over the neatly folded robes inside. The Mark on his forearm stood stark against his pale skin. He was too immersed by the way it subtly moved to hear the door creak open in time.

He jolted slightly when he saw Isa stepping inside, instinctively halting at the sight of him in the process of putting on his clothes; bare-chested and wearing nothing but his trousers.

A faint blush dusted her cheeks before she composed herself and her gaze settled, unmistakable, on the Mark.

Regulus said nothing as he pulled his robes from the wardrobe and slipped them over his shoulders, fastening them with steady fingers.

"You're leaving?" Isa finally asked, her voice even.

Before he could answer, Barty and Evan joined, leaning against the frame with watchful expressions.

Regulus straightened his robes, smoothing the fabric over his chest before running a hand through his hair, then turned to the mirror. He adjusted his collar, expression unreadable, before reaching for his

wand and slipping it into his pocket.

“Yes,” he said at last, his voice calm, composed. “But I won’t be long.”

“Alright, mate,” Evan said eventually, offering a small smile.

Regulus nodded once before moving past them.

*****

It was at best odd to be back at Bellatrix’s. The last time Regulus had set foot inside her house, he’d seen twelve people die, one at his own hands. The time before that, he had freed Davies from Bellatrix’s basement.

Just the quick thought about it — them pressed under the cloak, Davies’s hollow eyes, the hammering of his pulse, the sweat on his skin as they had nearly collided with Bellatrix in the entrance hall, or on the stairs… It haunted the edges of his mind. His stomach wisted involuntarily in sheer horror, but he swallowed and quickly schooled his expression into something unreadable, even as he walked down that corridor to the meeting room and realised that precisely one level up, he’d snuck to Bellatrix’s bedroom when they’d heard her impending return to the room, forcing them to run through the fireplace.

The door to the meeting room was slightly ajar, and though he was a little early, the room was already filling with low murmurs and the scent of spiced wine. At the head of the long, dark-wood table sat the Dark Lord himself, composed, regal, his expression slightly amused as his dark eyes lifted to meet Regulus’s.

Lucius sat at his right side, ever polished and poised, offering Regulus a knowing smile in greeting. At the Dark Lord’s left sat Bellatrix, her dark eyes sharp and her expression the usual mix of disdain and predatory whenever she looked at Regulus. The others were scattered around the table — Travers, Rowle, Amaryllis’s father; Mr. Greengrass and his brother, Mr. Carrow, Evan’s father, Mr. Flint and Mr. Nott.

The moment Regulus stepped fully inside, Mr. Nott rose from his chair, offering a firm handshake before clapping him on the back.

“Ah, our honourable guest,” Mr. Greengrass drawled, lifting his goblet.

At that, the rest of the room erupted in applause — the deafening

sound of approval and excitement making Regulus's skin prickle. He could feel every gaze on him; smug and expectant. Yaxley whistled rowdily and Rololphus let out a bark of laughter. Regulus forced himself to nod in acknowledgment, forced himself to smile lightly, despite the unease curling in his stomach.

Eventually, he was released from the attention and took his seat. Just moments later, Dolohov and Rabastan, the younger Lestrange, slid into the chair beside him, shaking his hand in greeting, while Dolohov gave him a nod of approval.

And then, silence followed.

The door closed. Every eye in the room turned to the Dark Lord.

He sat with effortless command, his fingers steepled, his expression laced with calculation. The room hung on the precipice of his words, waiting.

At last, he smiled.

"Welcome," he said, his voice smooth. "As you all undoubtedly know, we have entered a new phase of the war."

His eyes swept over the gathered people. "As you all know, we have finally rid ourselves of the spy who has plagued us for over a year."

A fresh round of applause erupted, louder than before, directed solely at Regulus. He fought the urge to shift in his seat, fought *immensely* hard to suppress the heat rising in his neck and on his cheeks as he locked gazes with Mr. Nott and Mr. Greengrass across from him, applauding and winking at him in approval.

The Dark Lord's lips curled with amusement as he observed the reaction of the room, before bringing it back to order. "Much of our work remains covert, at least until the Ministry acknowledges the war. A futile denial on their part — they waste precious resources covering up the truth, and in doing so, they only weaken themselves. Just this week, we have successfully taken control of three important storage sites for vital supplies."

Lucius's eyes glinted with satisfaction. Across the table, Yaxley sent Regulus a quick wink.

The meeting continued, shifting into routine matters — the steady infiltration of the Ministry, the recruitment of key figures, the

discussion of potential new supporters. There were brief, tantalising mentions of missions abroad, but only brief and in passing; Regulus noted them carefully but knew better than to ask. These were clearly things he was not meant to know more about.

At last, the Dark Lord dismissed the gathering. Chairs scraped against the polished floor as the attendees rose. Regulus, too, began to stand—

“Regulus,” the Dark Lord ordered. “Please, stay.”

The simple sentence sent a shiver down his spine. He froze on his feet as the others filed out, feeling his throat dry as the door closed behind them. He didn’t miss the curious eyes of many attendees, nor the encouraging nod from Lucius.

Now, it was just the two of them. He had never been alone with the Dark Lord before. What was this about?

The Dark Lord watched him in silence for a moment before speaking.

“You’ve done a terrific job, Regulus.” His voice was soft, almost warm. “There are many twice your age, and not half as sharp.”

Pride flared in Regulus’s chest, pushing back the lingering nerves, as he thought of Bellatrix’s sour expression, the knowledge that *he’d* done what she had so eagerly wanted to do — identify the spy, take credit for getting rid of him.

Although it had been an awful ordeal, and Regulus could hardly sleep because of it, he had to suppress the urge to smirk at the thought of Bellatrix’s unparalleled jealousy, the knowledge he’d outshone her, once again.

“Sit,” the Dark Lord continued. “We have some things to discuss.”

Regulus lowered himself into the chair, hands clasped tightly in his lap. The air had shifted into something heavy, more serious.

"As for the new school year, there are a few matters we must... agree upon."

Regulus nodded.

“The Pure Quill is no longer viable,” the Dark Lord said plainly. “With Thorne gone, it is too much effort to maintain. Instead, you must ensure that no one — no one — knows of your official affiliation with

our cause. Do not show them the Mark. If Dumbledore becomes aware of your allegiance, you may be expelled. And you being at Hogwarts is of far greater importance."

Regulus swallowed, thinking of his friends, who very well knew whom he was associated with and had eyed the Mark in awe.

"I trust your closest companions know where your loyalties lie," the Dark Lord said lightly, as though reading his thoughts. "But apart from them, no one can know. You must ensure their silence as well."

Regulus inclined his head. "I understand."

The Dark Lord gave a small nod of approval.

"In that regard, I want you to keep track of any students who may be… promising. At the end of the year, we will be accepting a new wave of recruits."

Regulus straightened slightly, listening intently.

"We also require you to be more mobile," the Dark Lord said, watching him closely. "With the war intensifying, it would be impractical to limit your movements to Hogsmeade weekends and school holidays."

Regulus frowned slightly. "How—?"

The Dark Lord's expression remained unreadable. "Narcissa devised a rather useful solution, in cooperation with your mother."

Regulus stiffened.

What?

"My mother?"

A slow nod. "She has agreed to claim illness to the outside world. To the Ministry. If everyone — including Dumbledore — believes she is unwell, you will be permitted to visit her at any time deemed... necessary."

Regulus stared.

God, yes, that would work. It was perfect. Of course Mother would agree to it — what greater honour than to serve the cause? And, frankly, she barely left the house anyway ever since Sirius's betrayal.

And it made sense now — why he had been pushed to master Apparition so quickly. They needed him mobile. They needed him ready.

A wave of excitement washed over him.

Finally, it was happening — finally his task would extend beyond Hogwarts. He would be *part* of this; of the war, the movement — no longer confined to the walls of Hogwarts. He would have real tasks. Real missions. *Field work.*

The Dark Lord allowed him a moment to process and contain his excitement, and then his gaze sharpened.

Something in his tone sent a fresh wave of nerves through Regulus's stomach, smothering the earlier excitement.

"This must remain between you and me," the Dark Lord said, voice quiet but firm. "It cannot leave this room. Am I understood?"

Regulus swallowed. A strange mixture of dread and pride churning inside him that he couldn't really place. Dread — because he had no idea what was coming. But pride… pride because he was being trusted with something private. Something *important* . Something between him and the Dark Lord alone.

He nodded. "Yes, my Lord."

What came next was *not* what he had expected.

"At some point this year, I may require you to retrieve information." The Dark Lord leaned forward slightly. "Certain books, from certain libraries."

Regulus was seemingly confused, but did not question him.

"It will all become clear in time," the Dark Lord continued. "But in that regard — and in regard to your mission at Hogwarts generally — you have another important task."

Silence.

"I want you to stay close to Horace Slughorn."

Regulus blinked.

Well, he hadn't expected *that* either.

Slughorn?

The Dark Lord's lips curved into something resembling a smile. "Be his favourite student. Attend his dinners. Engage in any activities he invites you to. We must always have someone within the faculty who can be… persuaded to assist us. Whether he realises it or not."

Regulus exhaled, understanding dawning on him.

He had to woo him. So that if he needed favours, he could get them easily.

Very clever.

"I see."

The Dark Lord inclined his head, satisfied.

"You may go."

Regulus rose to his feet.

"Again," the Dark Lord said, a glint of amusement in his eyes. "Terrific work, Regulus."

Regulus bowed his head, unable to suppress the triumphant smile creeping onto his face as pride and anticipation washed through him.

*****

The next evening at sunset, Regulus followed Yaxley's instructions and pulled on some easy Muggle clothes — a light pullover, perfect for the summer night, and comfortable trousers. It felt strange to wear something so casual.

Downstairs, Isa, Barty, and Evan were in the drawing room, likely waiting for him, as they didn't yet know he'd be probably gone for the entire night.

He paused in the doorway, watching them. Evan was lazily flipping through a book, while Isa and Barty lounged on the sofa, cigarettes in hand, blowing out rings of smoke.

"Ha! Mine's bigger, Crouch!" Isa declared triumphantly, sending a perfect ring floating toward Barty.

Barty snorted and flicked his wand, twisting the smoke into the

unmistakable shape of a middle finger.

Isa howled with laughter. “Ha — what spell is *that*?”

Barty, looking very smug because he knew a spell the brilliant Isadora Nott didn’t, was undoubtedly about to underscore the secrecy of his knowledge when his gaze landed on Regulus.

“Black,” he greeted with a grin.

Regulus smiled back, a wave of unexpected gratitude washing over him. They had spent the entire summer together, and now, in just two days, they’d be off to Hogwarts again. It struck him, more than ever, at that moment how his friends had grown so comfortable with each other, with him, spending all that time together in his house.

“Reg,” Isa said, her dark eyes flickering with curiosity as she took in his attire.

“You going somewhere?” Evan asked, scanning the change in clothes as well.

Regulus nodded, leaning against the doorframe. “I’ll probably be out until sunrise.”

He didn’t miss the unmistakable curiosity in their expressions, but none of them asked.

They wouldn’t — following the Dark Lord’s orders, he had pressed them immediately after the meeting to not tell a soul about his involvement in the Revolution, the Mark on his arm or any other thing they thought they knew.

Now, his friends were trustworthy so he knew they’d stick to their word, but especially Barty had the tendency to run his mouth after a drink, so Regulus had framed it as an opportunity to prove themselves for the impending new wave of admissions just in case.

As if on cue, a figure appeared beside him in the doorway.

“Black,” Yaxley drawled, smirking.

Regulus had never seen him in anything but robes before. Now, clad in a fitted T-shirt and dark jeans, he was all broad muscle, the Mark on his forearm blending seamlessly with the other tattoos covering his skin.

Barty and Evan were visibly impressed.

Yaxley's gaze swept over the room, slow and deliberate, before settling on Isa.

She was perched on the sofa, one leg draped over the other, her summer dress slipping just enough to reveal sun-kissed skin. Her hair was loose, golden waves spilling over her shoulders as she brought her cigarette to her lips, exhaling with effortless poise. The low glow of the evening sun caught the sharp angles of her cheekbones, the delicate curve of her throat.

Yaxley's smirk deepened.

Regulus, watching from the corner of his eye, didn't miss the way Yaxley's gaze lingered.

After a moment, Yaxley turned his attention back to the group, nodding toward Barty and Isa. "Care to toss me one?"

Barty obliged, flicking a cigarette his way. Yaxley caught it easily, slipping it between his lips before lighting it with a casual flick of his wand. He inhaled deeply, exhaling a slow stream of smoke before smirking. "Haven't had one of these in ages," he mused, voice edged with amusement. His gaze flicked to Barty. "Where'd you get them?"

"A Muggle souk in Damascus," Isa answered smoothly, before Barty could so much as open his mouth.

Yaxley's head turned slightly, eyebrows lifting, as if only now registering that *she* had spoken. He had assumed, of course, that Barty had procured them — not Isa. Not a girl and certainly not from a Muggle market.

Isa, leaning back against the sofa, took another slow drag from her cigarette, watching Yaxley through thick lashes. The hint of a smirk played on her lips.

Yaxley let the cigarette dangle lazily between his fingers, nodding. "Brilliant," he admitted, eyes flicking over her once more before turning to Regulus.

"You ready?" he asked, exhaling another stream of smoke.

Regulus, trying to ignore the suffocating stench of Yaxley's cigarette, cast a glance at his friends and offered them a small smile before

pushing off the doorframe.

“Yeah.”

Without another word, he followed Yaxley out of the drawing room.

*****

The place they were to surveil was a warehouse. It was basically a massive, cavernous hall hidden deep within a forest. With its rusted iron walls and roof partially hidden by a canopy of leaves it looked abandoned from the outside. It was not abandoned in the slightest, though — a massive dividing wall split the hall in two and although Regulus couldn’t see what was behind and wasn’t told either, it was apparently important enough to warrant a night of surveillance.

Their post was tucked away in a small side chamber near the front of the hall. Despite its size, the room was well-furnished: five plush armchairs arranged around a broad, heavy table cluttered with magical surveillance devices — delicate glass spheres that shimmered when detecting movement, enchanted mirrors that flickered to life when someone approached and and a hovering quill that twitched in anticipation, ready to record anything deemed noteworthy.

Regulus sat in one of the chairs, absently looking at the devices sprawled across the table. Across from him, Yaxley leaned back, clearly at ease, his eyes scanning the poker cards in his hands.

Regulus too studied his cards as Yaxley took a lazy sip of his drink. "Think anyone'll actually show up?" Regulus asked, glancing toward the surveillance devices again.

Yaxley smirked, dealing another card with a flick of his wrist. "Hope so. Otherwise, we’re stuck playing this all night."

A glass orb on the table pulsed faintly before settling again.

Regulus exhaled, setting down a card. "Your move."

He had never been alone with Yaxley before — he had known him for years, of course; Yaxley was Lucius’s best friend, and with Lucius being with Cissy for so long, their paths had often crossed, but they had never really *sat* together, just the two of them. Not weird — Yaxley was in his mid twenties, while Regulus was still a year from coming of age, not yielding a lot to talk about. At least, not back in the day.

Now, it turned out that Yaxley made for pleasant company. He was the sort of person who made easy conversation and made conversation easy — quick with a remark, skilled at weaving his own experiences into a story, unbothered by silences whenever they arose. He talked about his time at Hogwarts, sharing anecdotes of mischief and gossip about professors. He had a sharp wit, knowing exactly when to add a biting comment or a dry joke. But more than that, he seemed to have an instinct for what Regulus felt comfortable sharing.

He asked about classes, about the sort of trouble Regulus and his friends got into, even about his brief time at Beauxbatons. But he steered clear of topics Regulus didn't want to discuss — never once mentioning Thorne, or family matters, or girls.

At least, until Isa's name came up.

Regulus had seen it coming, of course. He had grown used to the effect Isa had on men. Or well, when they were younger, it had been limited to boys their own age. Now, as she had gotten older, the attention she drew extended beyond that. Older blokes took notice now, not just of her beauty, but also the effortless confidence she seemed to carry herself with.

And he had seen the way Yaxley looked at her.

He had seen it in the way Yaxley's eyes had lingered on her in the drawing room, travelling over the loose waves of her golden hair, the summer dress skimming her figure. He had noticed it in the way Yaxley had watched her through the veil of cigarette smoke, intrigued. And he had *definitely* seen it in the way Yaxley had duelled her — sharp, challenging, with the air of someone who was flirting as much as he was testing her.

With that in mind, Regulus had been careful. He had *tried* not to bring up her name, knowing exactly where it would lead.

But in the heat of the story, he had let his guard slip.

Yaxley smirked, leaning back in his chair. "She's something else, that one." His tone was casual, but there was an edge to it, something bordering on the wrong side of appreciation.

Regulus didn't look up from his cards. "Obviously." His voice was clipped, offering no room for discussion.

Yaxley watched him, clearly entertained. "Alright, then. What's the

deal with you two?”

Regulus kept his expression neutral, turning a card over between his fingers. “What do you mean?”

Yaxley gave him a knowing look. “Are you and Nott a thing, or…?”

Unbidden, Regulus thought of the night in the drawing room. The way he had exploded at Dolohov and Rabastan for their comments, the crude insinuations about her. And, inevitably, how the mood had shifted the moment he’d put his foot down — how, ever since, they hadn’t dared to so much as look at her when he was in the room.

Yes — that evening, it had become crystal clear to Regulus that in these things, boundaries had to be set firmly and in no uncertain terms.

He placed his cards down deliberately, then lifted his gaze to Yaxley’s, steady and unyielding.

Regulus’s voice came quiet, firm. “ She’s not up for discussion, Corban.”

A beat of silence followed.

Yaxley’s smirk faltered — just for a second — before his expression shifted to something understanding and something amused, and an unmistakable hint of something like respect.

He leaned back, swirling the drink in his glass.. Then he gave a lazy nod. “Fair enough, Black.” His voice was light, but there was weight behind the words. “Noted.”

Then, suddenly, a glass orb at the edge of the table pulsed sharply, flickering red.

Regulus sat up straight, wand in hand before he’d even registered the movement.

Yaxley barely reacted, glancing at the orb and stretching his arms over his head. “Relax. It’s just Rodolphus.”

Regulus exhaled, lowering his wand, but the tension in his shoulders didn’t ease.

Rodolphus Lestrange.

He had to sit with Bellatrix's husband for the rest of the night.

Bloody brilliant.

Surprisingly, though, it turned out to be tolerable.

As long as Yaxley kept the conversation going — which he did, functioning as a bridge between them — it was alright. They mostly discussed spells, combat techniques and Quidditch predictions for the upcoming season.

Regulus was knackered, though. He had woken at his usual time that morning, and with nothing to do but drink, talk and play cards, the night stretched on endlessly, especially as the vast majority of topics discussed didn't really interest him. His limbs grew heavy, and as he slouched further into his chair, he felt himself drifting, eyes half-lidded—

Until all hell broke loose.

The surveillance charms flared, every magical device on the table bursting to life.

Regulus bolted upright, hand flying to his wand. "Another one of us?"

Yaxley was already on his feet. With a flick of his wand, a Disillusionment Charm swept over them. "No, Black," he said, shaking his head. "This isn't us."

Regulus pressed himself against the wall of the chamber, heartbeat hammering in his throat as footsteps thundered outside.

Fuck. Fuck.

This was supposed to be simple surveillance — nothing was meant to happen. Lucius had assured him it was 'highly unlikely' they'd need to do anything but stay awake.

Well, so much for that.

The warehouse door crashed open and four figures stormed inside.

Regulus barely had time to register them before Yaxley and Rodolphus exchanged a sharp look — a silent understanding. Then, a movement —

Yaxley rounded the corner and struck.

A flash of green.

The first intruder hit the ground before he had even realised what had happened, his body crumpling onto the floor.

The remaining three pushed into the hall with a shielding charm, spells already bursting from their wands. Yaxley sprinted across the hall in a blur, diving behind a stack of heavy crates as hexes flew around him.

Regulus met Rodolphus's gaze.

A sharp nod.

They had to move; they couldn't stay here. The chamber would be a death trap if they were cornered. Better to move — to fight — than be ambushed in the tight space.

Rodolphus cast a shield as they crossed the open floor — hexes ricocheted off the shimmering barrier, searing past them as they ran. Regulus felt the heat of one narrowly missing his ear and cursed. He reached cover, pressing against a pillar just as another jet of light struck where he had been standing a second before.

Shit.

Then something moved — one of the intruders making a break across the hall.

Regulus didn't think, didn't hesitate. He snapped his wand up and fired—

Missed.

"Shit," Yaxley hissed under his breath, ducking behind a crate beside him. "Would've been a good one, Black."

Regulus barely registered it. The entire world had become a blur things happened, but didn't seem to happen at the same time. Nothing felt real, yet he felt everything like he'd never done before. The chaos swelled around him, disjointed, overwhelming, but his body moved on instinct, fueled by adrenaline.

Another movement caught Regulus's attention.

The flick of a wand, a burst of green light—

Not aimed at him, but at Yaxley.

Instinctively, Regulus moved.

He didn't even think — his arm jerked up, a spell flying from his wand, colliding with the curse mid-air. Magic shattered with a deafening crack. Yaxley whirled, eyes flashing with something Regulus couldn't quite place — something sharp and calculating — before turning back to the fight.

A fraction of a second passed.

It was enough time for Rodolphus to strike; his curse hit another intruder square in the chest. The body hit the floor.

Regulus barely had time to register it, his breath came sharp and fast — no time to process the fact that two people had already died in front of him. No time to process that if he hesitated, if he *didn't* draw his wand and cast the Killing Curse, he would be next.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Sweat ran down his neck. Another spell hurtled toward Rodolphus — green.

Another Killing Curse.

Regulus blocked it without thinking.

Shit, they were truly out to *kill*. They *wanted* them dead.

He crouched behind cover, breathing hard. The three of them were scattered across the hall, separated, locking gazes from different vantage points.

Yaxley mouthed something.

On three.

Regulus nodded.

Yaxley raised his fingers.

One.

Two.

Three.

And then they moved.

They burst from cover, spells flying rapidly. The hall exploded into light — hexes and curses colliding mid-air, shields shattering, stone burning, crates splintering, a pillar crumbling.

Regulus didn't register anything actively — nor the sounds, nor the movements. He barely registered any of it, of the chaos. His body reacted faster than his mind.

Time seemed to slow.

Then, his eyes locked on someone across the hall — early twenties, maybe a few years older than himself. A stranger.

Time stood still now.

Regulus froze.

The man moved first, his wand flicking up, green light erupting—

Meant for him, for Regulus.

Regulus *could* have struck first. Could have lifted his wand, could have cast the curse, could have ended it before the man had the chance.

But he didn't, his wand still frozen in his hand.

And still — a flash of green made its way to the intruder.

The man dropped dead.

Regulus's breath caught in his throat — his gaze snapping to the source.

Rodolphus.

For a moment, just a fraction of a second, they locked eyes.

Regulus barely registered his own shaking hands, the way his breath came short and fast. Rodolphus's expression was unreadable.

Then—

Another body hit the ground as Yaxley had struck the last one.

And just like that, it was over.

The three of them stood there, panting, doubled over from the effort.

Regulus stared at the bodies sprawled across the stone floor.

His heart slammed against his ribs, the rush of blood deafening, drowning out all other sound.

“Rodolphus,” Yaxley panted, his voice edged with urgency. “Go get reinforcements.”

Rodolphus barely hesitated. With a sharp nod, he strode outside and vanished into the night with a crack.

Yaxley, still breathing hard, turned back to Regulus. His eyes swept over him — not searching for injuries, but assessing him. Taking in the way Regulus stood frozen, wand still clutched tightly in his hand.

Then, with a sharp exhale, Yaxley let out a low, breathless laugh.

"Fucking impressive, Black," he muttered, shaking his head. "You saved both our lives out there."

Regulus didn’t respond, didn’t blink. HIs ears were still ringing, his thoughts sluggish, struggling to catch up to what had just happened.

He had been frozen.

He had been frozen in the most important, the most *crucial* moment.

He could have had him, could have killed the intruder. Could have saved himself.

But he *hadn’t*.

If Rodolphus hadn’t struck first, Regulus would be dead.

Yaxley exhaled again, rolling out his shoulders. "They told me you were good, but this..." He ran a hand through his hair, his voice still rough with adrenaline. "Fuck."

Regulus barely heard him, barely registered anything beyond the roaring thought that he had *failed*.

He had been frozen.

Unable to kill someone who would have killed him without hesitation.

The crack of Apparition outside shattered the silence. A moment later, footsteps echoed through the warehouse, marking the arrival of reinforcements.

Lucius entered first, followed by Mr. Nott and Mr. Carrow, their wands drawn, eyes sweeping the room sharply. Mr. Carrow veered off immediately, stepping outside to stand watch with Rodolphus.

Yaxley straightened. "Four of them," he began, voice shifting into something more controlled, more composed, as if he had already processed what had happened. "Stormed the place fast. First one dropped before he knew what hit him. The others had shields — got messy after that."

Regulus barely heard him.

His legs carried him forward automatically, following as the others moved back toward the chamber. He felt... disconnected, his body acting of its own accord while his mind lagged behind, still stuck in that hall.

Inside, Mr. Nott poured a drink and, without a word, handed the glass to Regulus.

It was already too late when he noticed it was alcohol.

God, he hated alcohol — the sharp burn, the way it seared his throat. But refusing wasn't an option — not in front of Mr. Nott, anyway.

He suppressed the shudder climbing up his spine as he took another sip. It burned, as expected, but … not the way it normally did. He barely felt it, and the part he *did* feel, felt actually… good. Pulling him back into his body. Reviving him.

Yaxley let out a short huff of laughter, still grinning. "Didn't even flinch," he remarked, nudging Lucius lightly. "You should've seen him, Luce. Saved my bloody life. And Rodolphus's, even."

Lucius's gaze flickered to Regulus, unreadable.

"Good job," he said, nodding approvingly.

He studied Regulus for a moment longer before exhaling. "That's enough for a first time." Stepping forward, he rested a hand on

Regulus's shoulder, guiding him toward the door. "Best get home. The shift is over soon anyway — the sun's rising."

Regulus nodded.

"Any injuries?"

Just his shirt, partially torn. A cut on his arm. A shallow cut on his cheek. Nothing serious.

He shook his head.

"You want someone to tap along?"

Regulus shook his head again, forcing himself to straighten, to compose himself. "No," he said, his voice hoarse. "It's alright."

He gave Lucius a reassuring smile that didn't meet his eyes in the slightest — then turned on the spot and Disapparated.

*****

Regulus landed at the Apparition point just past the wrought-iron gates of Black Manor. It was early morning and the sun had almost fully risen while the air smelled of that cold, crisp humidity just before a hot summer day.

He was knackered. Completely, fucking knackered.

God, he felt like he could sleep for a lifetime.

His feet carried him forward on autopilot, past the dew-laced grass, up the stone steps, and through the kitchen door.

Four people had died at his feet. None by his hand, though — because he had frozen, nailed to the ground, in the most crucial moment of it all. If Rodolphus hadn't been there, he'd be dead. Although, truth to be told, both Rodolphus and Yaxley would've been killed too, if he hadn't been there.

He was so immersed in his thoughts that he almost missed them; the presence of his friends in the kitchen hit him like a physical blow.

His breath caught — his body tensed — before realising that, of course, they had been there the entire time; he just hadn't noticed.

They were seated around the long wooden table, clad in pyjamas, hair

messy, hands curled around mugs of coffee. Their faces were tired, groggy — but alert as they took him in.

Isa's golden hair was mussed from sleep, though her eyes were sharp. Barty, of course, lounged with his chair tilted back, looking him over with something between curiosity and scrutiny. Evan, dark circles heavy under his eyes, rubbed a slow hand down his face.

Regulus felt something unpleasant coil in his stomach, like they had caught him doing something he wasn't supposed to.

He forced himself to shake it off, his eyes flicking over them once more before he let out a breath.

"What the hell has you lot up?"

Isa was on her feet before he had finished speaking, crossing the room and pulling him into a firm hug. He barely had time to react before she pulled back, her sharp gaze raking over him — taking in the torn shirt, the cut on his cheek, the gash on his hand.

"Are you alright?" she asked, voice tight with concern. "What happened?" She reached for his hand before he could pull away. "Oh, the one on your cheek is clean, but this — let me fix this."

She was already drawing her wand.

Regulus took a step back, shaking his head. "It's fine, Ies. Nothing happened. Doesn't hurt."

Isa was unimpressed. "Oh, really? And your shirt — did that just fall apart on its own?"

He barely registered the jolt as her fingers brushed against his stomach, lifting his ruined shirt to check for deeper injuries.

From the table, Barty and Evan exchanged a glance — a mix of curiosity, confusion and mild amusement at Isa's antics.

Regulus sighed, swatting Isa's hands away. "Don't overreact, Ies, I'm fine." He exhaled. "Now — seriously — what's got you lot up?"

Barty shot him a sour look. "Yeah, well, Black — we finally got a glimpse of what Nott's been complaining about with your tossing and turning."

Regulus frowned. "What?"

Barty jerked his chin at Isa. "The girl couldn’t sleep, could she?"

Evan stretched, rubbing a hand down his face. "Yes, Nott, can you sleep now that he’s back safe and sound?"

Isa arched a brow, arms crossing as she gestured at Regulus’s bare, battered torso. "You call this safe and sound?"

Barty snorted into his coffee.

Regulus groaned. "Don’t."

He was *so* tired. Perhaps even so tired that he’d be too unconscious, too far away for the nightmare to come.

His throat turned dry as he realised he didn’t even remember their faces.

Didn’t even know what the people looked like, who had just died at his feet.

Shaking it off, he ran a hand through his hair. "Look, I don’t know about you lot, but I need a few hours of sleep."

"Yeah," Evan muttered, pushing back from the table. "Same."

And with that, they all went upstairs.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, Hogwarts 😎

Chapter 4: Of Returns & Captaincy

Chapter Notes

> Okay, so the fourth chapter was insanely long (14k+ words) so I divided it into two chapters, this being the first. I will upload the second part soon because I feel they ... sort of belong together, but alas. I hope you'll enjoy.

Regulus boarded the Hogwarts Express on September 1st with a disturbing mix of dread and anticipation twisting in his gut.

He had spent the last day and night at Grimmauld Place, so he'd see his parents before returning to Hogwarts. Dinner had been stiff and awkward, enough to make him practically want to kiss Uncle Alphard's gravestone in gratitude for leaving him Black Manor. The mere thought of spending the entire summer at Grimmauld made him shudder.

Still, there had been one pleasant surprise — Mother, in her own poor and concealed way, had managed a compliment about his O.W.L. results and his supposed magnificent duelling skills. Regulus was certain she hadn't been given details, but he knew Cissy and Lucius frequently visited his parents and that Cissy never missed an opportunity to put in a good word for him. This time, it had earned him something unexpected; for the first time, Mother had granted him complete freedom in choosing his subjects. Where he had once been expected to take everything as long as it fit the Hogwarts schedule — barring Muggle Studies and Divination — she had now said she trusted him to select whatever he deemed important for his future. Of course, he was clever enough to recognise the unspoken expectation that he would still take most subjects and pass with excellent marks, but after thinking it over for practically the entire night, he had decided to at least drop Care of Magical Creatures and Arithmancy.

The idea of fewer subjects, fewer classes in general, almost made him feel relieved about the upcoming year — almost. With the Captaincy and his work for the Revolution, there would still be hardly any time left to breathe.

He had arrived early — early enough to secure their usual carriage without the risk of running into certain people. Some, like Sirius, he *really* wanted to avoid. One, in particular, he wanted to steer clear of as much as he wanted to be close to in every intimate way humanly

possible.

It was surreal — it actually felt unreal, their night together at Black Manor.

The idea that he had spent an afternoon building a raft out of stray wood with James in the same garden he'd sat and swam with Mulciber and Avery. The idea that he had baked cookies with James in the same kitchen where he'd run into Barty, Isa and Evan after returning from his 'field work' for the Revolution, for the Dark Lord… The idea that he'd taken a bath with James in the very bathroom where Isa did her strange makeup rituals because the bathroom adjacent to Sirius's old bedroom was always occupied by Barty and his obscenely long showers…

The idea that, in *his* bed, he had touched and been touched, had kissed and been kissed, had taken and been taken in return. That, there, he had whispered the three words, with James still inside him, their bodies still trembling, James's lips pressing against the damp skin of his neck.

No — that could not have happened, could it?

He was afraid to see him again. To be, in the most cruel way possible, reminded of what he wanted, what he longed for, ached for in the deepest corners of his soul, but could not, ever, have. What could not, ever, be.

But *God,* did he want it.

Did he want to bicker about the food every afternoon and crawl against him every evening. Did he want to wake up next to him every morning, feel him inside him every night.

Especially after seeing him there — seeing *them* there — in Black Manor, so domestic, so normal, so natural.

The idea that it was within reach but forever untouchable…

It felt a bit like grief. But unlike grief, there was no end to it. No neat, linear process of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. There was only a relentless loop — denial, anger, bargaining, depression — until, instead of reaching acceptance, he was thrown back into denial again. An endless, torturous cycle of loss.

And he knew, with seeing him there, at Hogwarts, it would all slam into him once again; the fact that it *had* been real, the fact that James Potter existed, that James's love for him existed as much as Regulus's love for him, and the undeniable fact that it could never, ever be.

God, no — it was better to hide in this carriage than risk bumping into James on the train or worse, on the platform — where he would almost certainly be accompanied by both Sirius and Euphemia Potter.

The idea of being confronted with James, Sirius and Euphemia Potter all at once was enough to make him positively ill.

Luckily, his friends quickly pulled him out of his endless thoughts. Soon enough, the carriage was crammed — Mulciber, Avery, Barty, and Evan wedged tightly on one bench, Regulus, Severus, and Amaryllis on another. Isa had settled at his feet, leaning against his legs, while Melania was propped against the door, her head tilted back.

As Regulus's gaze swept over them, a strange feeling washed over him — only a couple of days ago, he had sat at a table with the Dark Lord, discussing strategies with Evan's, Isa's, and Amaryllis's fathers. And they probably had no idea. The thought made him snort.

Isa looked up immediately. "What?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

He reached for a book, though often the words blurred together. He half-registered the banter around him, occasionally pulled back into the present by Amaryllis's loud laugh, or Isa's exaggerated snort at something Barty had said.

At some point, Avery, Snape, and Mulciber got up, saying something about finding other people, while Barty suddenly sat up straight, cursing.

"Fuck, I've got that bloody Prefect meeting," Barty groaned, pushing himself up. "I'll go find Eira after. See you lot later."

Regulus barely glanced up, but Melania made a face, unimpressed.

"What does he *see* in that girl?" she asked.

Amaryllis hummed in agreement. "Honestly. It's weird. Like — she couldn't get Regulus, so she settled for him?"

Regulus stiffened, suddenly extremely aware of his own existence.

Isa, now sitting on the bench with more space available, turned sharply to Amaryllis. “Don’t ever say that with him around.”

Amaryllis blinked. “What?”

Isa pointedly didn’t look at Regulus, for which he was very glad. Her voice was tight. “You know… that she went after Reg first. It… might be a sensitive issue.”

Regulus shifted uncomfortably. Did they *really* need to discuss this with him present? He could feel his skin crawl.

Isa exchanged a look with Evan.

Amaryllis rolled her eyes. “Alright, whatever. I’m going to check on some girls. Fancy coming, Mel?”

Melania pushed off the door, her eyes trailing over the compartment. “See you later?” she asked, her gaze hesitating on Evan for a second too long.

Regulus caught it immediately — the faintest hint of colour rising on Evan’s face.

Regulus’s eyebrows shot up. He turned to Isa just in time to catch her barely containing a laugh.

The moment the door slid shut, Isa turned to Evan.

“Please tell your girlfriend to be nice to her,” she said.

Evan, now properly blushing, stammered, “She’s not my girlfriend—”

Isa snorted. “Yeah, sure.” Then, more seriously, “But really, talk to her. She might listen to you.”

Regulus’s thoughts drifted back to Amaryllis’s comment.

“What exactly did you mean by ‘sensitive issue’?” He frowned. “There’s no reason for him to be weird about it. It’s not like Warrington and I were ever a thing.”

The memory hit him before he could stop it — his dormitory, Eira sitting on his bed, leaning in to kiss him… and Isa bursting through the door.

The pained expression on her face betrayed her mind was acutely plagued by that memory too.

Isa exhaled. “Yeah, well. That’s sort of the point, isn’t it? You weren’t interested in her in the slightest, but she was *very* interested in you.”

Regulus choked on air. “What?”

Isa and Evan exchanged another glance before Isa said, almost carefully, “And if it had been anyone else, it wouldn’t have mattered as much.”

Regulus frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Isa shifted in her seat. “Well… you being *you* makes it worse, doesn’t it?”

Regulus just stared. “What?”

Evan groaned. “Aren’t you supposed to be the clever one?”

Isa sighed, as if this were painfully obvious. “He envies you, Reg.”

Regulus blinked. “You’re having a laugh.”

Evan snorted. “Well, you know… being the golden boy and all.”

Regulus stilled.

The *golden boy*?

It was then that Regulus realised more than ever, felt more than ever, how desperately Barty wanted it — wanted to be part of the Revolution, wanted to serve the Dark Lord, be out there, fighting, mean something to the world.

Sure, for years they’d — all of them — talked about nothing else, had dreamed about it out loud, had worked on their duelling skills in preparation…. So, Regulus *knew* — but now he felt it.

Because Regulus had it all. The seat at the table, the honour of being one of the first, the youngest with the Mark on his arm.

And Barty envied him.

Oh, but if Barty only knew. If he had even the slightest idea — if he knew what Regulus had been forced to do, what he had seen, what he

had endured by sitting at that table—

“He has no idea…”

He thought of the bodies he had seen drop dead at his feet. He shuddered.

Isa’s voice was quieter this time. “And, well… being born into a family like ours instead of being the son of Crouch Sr.”

Regulus let out a humourless laugh. “He has no idea,” he repeated.

Isa held his gaze, her expression unreadable. She did, of course. She knew exactly what he was thinking — his parents, the governor. The rules, the expectations, the excruciating dinners, the godforsaken parties, bearing the Black heirship. To be the last Black heir. To be *their* son. To be raised by a governor rather than by his parents — and what that had meant for Regulus. The years and years of abuse, the loneliness, the shame, the suffocating self-loathing.

He shuddered again.

God, no, Barty had no bloody idea.

Isa’s eyes softened in understanding.

Evan broke the tense silence.

“I’ll — I’ll talk to her.”

*****

Strangely enough, seeing James again wasn’t the only unsettling thing of that evening.

It started with the carriages.

Regulus walked in step with Evan and Barty as they made their way through the crowd, the crisp air filled with the usual buzz of students greeting friends and calling out over the noise.

Barty was grinning, launching into some elaborate retelling of a prank he and Evan had pulled last year, while Evan laughed beside him, offering the occasional additional remark. Regulus’s thoughts, though, were elsewhere — on the castle they’d enter soon, on the reality that James would be there. In the same corridors. On the same pitch. In the same space.

He swallowed, his throat dry, pushing the thought aside as they neared the carriages. The familiar black vehicles stood waiting as they always did, lined up in rows along the edge of the station, the lanterns on their sides flickering in the dimming light. Students clambered in, chatting, laughing, like always.

But then—

Regulus stopped abruptly.

A pair of creatures — dark, skeletal, with leathery wings and bony frames — stood at the front of the nearest carriages. They snorted softly.

Regulus jolted, his breath catching in his throat.

He blinked. Once. Twice. The creatures were still there.

Isa, who had been just ahead, turned at his sudden pause. Her eyes flickered between him and the carriage, a wary expression growing.

Regulus stepped closer, his gaze fixed on the creatures.

“What the hell…” he whispered.

Barty and Evan, already settling into their seats, glanced up.

“You alright, Reg?” Isa asked carefully.

Regulus nodded absently, still staring at the creatures before flicking his gaze around at the other carriages. “Why the hell are they using these things to pull them all of a sudden?”

Barty snorted. “What?”

Regulus gestured vaguely. “The creatures. They weren’t here before.”

Evan gave him a baffled look. “What creatures?”

Regulus turned back to them. “The ones pulling the carriages, obviously.”

Barty and Evan exchanged glances.

“What are you on about, Black?” Barty said flatly.

Regulus frowned, looking again — at the creatures, their strange

wings and frames.

“What did I miss? They always carried themselves before, and now suddenly, they need these?”

Isa’s sharp inhale broke through the conversation.

Regulus turned to her, her expression frozen in place.

“What?” he asked.

She didn’t answer immediately. Her eyes looked… slightly alarmed.

Regulus arched a brow. “What, Nott?”

Isa flicked a quick glance at Barty and Evan before shaking her head. “Nothing.”

Regulus’s eyes narrowed. “Spill it, Nott.”

She hesitated, shifting slightly in her seat. “Well,” she started, her tone oddly cautious. “They — they’re pulled by Thestrals, aren’t they?”

Regulus blinked. “I wouldn’t know. I haven’t seen—”

“Seen *what*?” Barty cut him off, exasperated. “There’s nothing there.”

Evan nodded. “Yeah, seriously. What the hell are you on about?”

Regulus stilled.

He turned back to the creatures. Still there.

And then, slowly, back to his friends.

They truly couldn’t see them?

Isa was watching him closely now.

“We can’t see them, Reg,” she said, her voice quieter. “Only you can.”

Regulus stared. His stomach twisted slightly in discomfort. “Why would only I be able to see them?”

A tense silence settled between them.

Isa’s voice was barely above a whisper. “You can only see them if you’ve seen… someone die.”

The words dropped like heavy rocks.

Barty and Evan's heads snapped towards Regulus, a mix of realisation, shock and confusion dawning in their expressions all at once.

Regulus felt his whole body go rigid.

"...Oh."

He didn't look at them. He *felt* their stares burning into him, but he kept his gaze fixed ahead, only looking at Isa.

Her eyes were big, uncomfortable. She shifted suddenly, clearing her throat. "So, Barty, how was your Prefect meeting?" she asked, her voice forcibly light.

A brief pause. Then, finally, Barty tore his gaze away from Regulus, exhaling sharply.

"I'm bloody fucked, aren't I?" he grumbled. "You'll never guess who's made Head Boy."

Regulus flinched. The answer formed in his head before Barty even said it.

"Potter," Barty spat, his voice dripping with disdain.

Isa went still.

God, was this ride turning out to be uncomfortable.

"Oh," she breathed. Her voice was tight and she definitely avoided Regulus's gaze on purpose. "Potter is Head Boy?"

Evan scoffed. "Oh, brilliant. He's Quidditch Captain *and* Head Boy? What's next, Minister for Magic?"

Barty huffed. "And you'll *never* guess who's Head Girl."

Silence.

"That Mudblood from Snape."

Regulus barely thought before he said it. "Lily Evans?"

The carriage fell into an odd silence.

All three of them turned to him.

Regulus kept his expression neutral, but internally, he was cursing himself; he could *feel* the uncomfortable question pressing on him. Why had *he* , of all people, been the one to fill in the name?

He pointedly did *not* think about the fact that he had recently sat in a car with Evans in the backseat, navigating the streets of Muggle London.

Or the fact that he and James — well, yes…

Or the fact that he could see the Thestrals because — well, yes…

Shit. When had life become so bloody complicated?

Evan shook his head. “How shocking — the Gryffindors running the show.”

Regulus exhaled, barely hearing them now, staring absently out of the carriage.

Fucking, bloody complicated indeed.

*****

It was exactly like he’d expected it to be, and worse.

He had been able to postpone it, to put it off until the main course. Had busied himself listening intently to Melania’s stories, to Isa’s sharp commentary beside him, had laughed a bit too hard at the jokes Barty threw at Evan across the table, chimed in on the discussions Severus had with Mulciber and Avery, nodding along at just the right moments.

But at some point, while absently scooping his fork through the mashed potatoes on his plate, he looked up.

And that is when he saw him.

James was sitting at the Gryffindor table, laughing hard, his head tilted back slightly, his hazel eyes amused. His shoulders shook as he grinned at Sirius, who had definitely said something ridiculous, while a seventh-year girl next to him giggled along, nudging him playfully.

Then James reached for his goblet, still smiling, bringing it to his lips. And then, in that brief movement, his gaze lifted.

And his eyes locked with Regulus's.

The air was violently knocked out of Regulus's lungs.

His entire body reacted instantly — unbidden, uncontrolled, without restraint. His heart slammed into his ribs — a frantic, desperate rhythm that made his chest tighten. His throat dried up so fast he thought he might choke. And his hands — his traitorous, shaking hands — clutched his fork so tightly that Regulus decided to set it down as subtly as he could.

His fingers curled into his lap instead, pressing hard against the fabric of his robes in a futile attempt to compose himself. His skin prickled with heat, his breath felt too short, his entire body on edge, teetering on the edge of — he had no bloody clue of what, actually.

Oh, how he longed for him. How he missed him.

The sensation was raw and immediate, sharp and devastating all at once.

James's warm, inviting voice. His big, surprisingly soft hands. The shuddering laugh he gave at his own jokes, the way he instinctively knew how Regulus felt even before he did. The raw emotion in his eyes when he kissed him, when he touched him, when he pulled him closer.

He missed all of him.

The memory of James against him was so visceral it made his stomach twist.

And then — so fast it was barely perceptible — James's lips twitched into the smallest of smiles.

Regulus wasn't sure if he had responded – if he had smiled back, if his face had done anything at all. In any case, he yanked his gaze away quickly, forcing himself to stare at his food, forcing his breathing to steady, forcing himself back into his body, unfazed and firm.

Isa's voice cut through the roaring in his ears.

"…you alright?"

Regulus blinked, refocusing, dragging his mind back to the present. Isa was watching him, wary, her sharp brown eyes flicking over him —

assessing, noticing too much as always.

His pulse was still erratic. He now sat on his hands to disguise how badly they trembled.

“Yeah,” he said, forcing the words out smoothly. “Brilliant.”

Isa arched a brow but said nothing.

Regulus exhaled slowly, eyes fixed on his plate, willing himself to pull himself together.

Fuck, this year was going to kill him.

*****

The rest of the first week at Hogwarts was eventful — and although James was a large part of the reason, he wasn’t the only one.

It felt both good and upsetting to be back. Upsetting because he actually missed the group that had formed at Black Manor, the easy rhythm between them as a group; Isa, Barty, Evan and him, with the occasional addition of Mulciber and Avery. It had been a natural, pleasant dynamic between them, which was now fractured by the presence of others; Evan who, although still claiming there was nothing going on between them, spent a great deal of his time with Melania, Barty who was regularly found with Eira in his lap, and the general addition of Amaryllis and Severus around.

On top of that, there were classes themselves. Regulus might have dropped two subjects this year, his schedule was still brutal. N.E.W.T. classes were relentless; every professor seemed determined to remind them that this was serious now, that there was no room for coasting by.

Still, despite all of that, he had missed Hogwarts — missed the castle, the grounds, the buzz of his friends at breakfast, almost able to pull him out of the horrors that the previous night’s nightmares had engraved into his mind.

The first few days had already brought developments; the first was the new Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor.

Last year, the position had been filled by a dork from the Ministry who had dared not touch upon anything beyond the dull, safe content in the textbook. The year before that, they’d been taught by Thorne.

Thorne.

The fact that Thorne was no more, that Regulus had killed him, still hit him in waves — as if realising it for the first time all over again.

He had killed their former Defence Professor.

With Thorne dead, the Ministry dork dismissed, and a laughable history of Professors — including one who was almost certainly a Squib and another an ex-convict — Regulus should have known that this year's appointment would stand out in some way, too.

And he was right about that.

Their first Defence lesson was on Tuesday, and it would be their first meeting with the Professor who hadn't showed up for the Start-of-Term Feast or any other meal so far.

The class was held with the Gryffindors, which meant the entire corridor outside the classroom was thick with tension; almost everyone in their year had taken the subject — which wasn't surprising; the Ministry might have tried to fool the people that it was all peace and harmony, but everyone knew better, knew there was a war going on which was only to intensify.

Slytherins stood on one side of the corridor, Gryffindors on the other — glancing, watching.

Barty lounged lazily against the stone wall, arms crossed, surveying the Gryffindors with his usual bored disdain. Regulus recognised Taylor from Gryffindor and some girl that had also partaken in the ASS-programme, albeit in a different group.

Then, without warning, the door to the classroom flew open.

The force of it startled everyone — Barty included, who jerked off the wall before composing himself and rolling his eyes.

A brief silence followed — everyone unsure whether to enter or to wait for the Professor to welcome them in.

Then Barty smirked and strode in first.

Isa, Evan and Regulus followed.

The moment Regulus stepped inside, his gaze snapped to the front of the classroom, where a woman was standing.

A young, undeniably beautiful woman.

Barty and Evan halted in their tracks.

Evan blinked, looking slightly stunned.

Barty flicked his gaze between Evan and Regulus, then grinned — his expression shifting from surprised to something far more wicked.

The four of them sat near the front. Barty and Evan took the first row; Isa and Regulus slid in behind them.

Regulus studied the Professor as the rest of the students filtered in.

She was tall and striking, with long, dark hair cascading over one shoulder. Her green eyes were sharp, almost piercing, standing out starkly against her high cheekbones and full lips. There was something about her — something commanding — something both welcoming and utterly formidable.

The room was silent.

Then, under his breath, Barty whistled.

“Oooh,” he whispered, leaning slightly towards Evan, “I wouldn’t mind getting some extra tutoring from her.”

Isa, without missing a beat, shot, “I’m sure Warrington can teach you some, Crouch.”

Evan and Regulus sniggered.

Barty shot Isa an unimpressed look but didn’t bother with a comeback. Instead, he shifted in his seat, turning his attention back to the Professor.

The last few students trickled into the classroom, all of them equally intrigued by the new Defence teacher.

She didn’t need to call for silence — the room settled on its own.

Now, Regulus wasn’t the type to be particularly affected by appearances. He could, objectively, acknowledge when someone was conventionally attractive, but there were few people he found acutely beautiful.

One of them was sitting beside him, rolling her eyes at Barty and

Evan.

Another was probably pulling some ridiculous prank with Sirius somewhere in the castle.

So yes, he could recognise that the Professor was stunning — by general consensus, certainly — but it didn't faze him much.

What did faze him, however, was when she shut the door with a single glance.

She didn't lift her wand.

She didn't so much as gesture.

She simply looked at it and it slammed shut.

Damn.

"Bloody hell," Isa muttered, clearly clocking it too.

A ripple of quiet unease passed through the students.

Then, as if sensing their wariness, the Professor opened her arms in an easy, inviting gesture, a broad smile spreading across her lips.

"Welcome, class," she said, her voice smooth and rich. "I am Professor Valaine, and I will be teaching you Defence Against the Dark Arts this year."

She smirked, something amused flickering across her expression. "And, well, tradition dictates that I'll be gone by this time next year. I only hope my departure will be peaceful — ideally not due to illness… or because some student has killed me."

Regulus choked.

It was clearly meant as a joke, but *God*, did it hit close to home.

Valaine nodded to herself. "Yes, I suppose I've taken a risk by accepting this position. But then again—" her lips quirked slightly, "— what is life without a challenge?"

She let her gaze sweep over the room of silent students before turning to her desk, where she picked up a roll of parchment. With a flick of her fingers, a quill appeared, hovering in anticipation above the scroll.

“Before we dive into the details of this year’s curriculum, I’d like to set up a proper record of your names,” she said. “So if you could be so kind as to introduce yourselves, my quill will handle the rest.”

She started with the Gryffindors, methodically working her way down the rows, before eventually turning to their side of the room.

Her gaze landed on Evan first.

“Rosier,” Evan coughed. “Evan Rosier.”

Valaine nodded, her sharp green eyes flicking to Barty next.

“Barty Crouch,” Barty said smoothly — but his voice quieted slightly as he uttered his surname.

Valaine studied him for a beat longer than necessary. “Ah,” she mused. “Son of the current Head of Law Enforcement.”

Regulus didn’t miss the way Barty’s jaw tightened. His fists curled slightly, his shoulders stiffening.

Then, without another word, he gave a curt nod, gaze dropping to the desk in front of him.

Valaine moved on. “And you are?”

“Isadora Nott,” Isa said, her voice even, unwavering.

Valaine’s gaze ranked over her before finally settling on Regulus.

Her lips quirked. “Let me guess,” she said, a knowing glint in her eyes. “You must be a Black.”

Regulus stiffened slightly, caught off guard.

How the hell did she know that?

Still, he managed to keep his expression neutral.

“Yeah,” he said carefully. “Regulus Black.”

Valaine nodded, as if that confirmed something. “I had the fortune of meeting your brother earlier today,” she explained. “You’re a spitting image of him, Mr. Black.”

Regulus didn’t blink, tried to school his features as he was trying to

work out whether this was a compliment or an insult, when Valaine turned to Amaryllis and Melania behind them.

“God, she’s something,” Isa muttered under her breath.

It wasn’t just her looks, or her confident, direct manners that made Valaine stand out, though — it was also her modus of teaching.

Once she finished collecting names, she set down the parchment and clasped her hands together.

“We’re going to do things differently this year,” she announced. “We will not be working from the textbook.”

Barty and Evan both sat up straighter, looking distinctly more interested.

“You — the students — will decide what we cover in class,” Valaine continued. “The only requirements are that your topics must be N.E.W.T.-level and cannot have been thoroughly covered already.”

A spark of interest rippled through the room.

Valaine smirked. “And you’ll have to make a case for it,” she added. “You will form groups of four, and you will have to pitch a topic. The first subject we cover will be based on the winning pitch. All future topics will be decided in a similar fashion.”

Excitement buzzed through the students.

“Oh,” Barty whispered, eyes gleaming, “I have some great ideas.”

Evan snorted.

*****

The N.E.W.T. Potions class was considerably smaller than that of Defence, but no less interesting — especially taking into account that it was taught by the Professor Regulus had been instructed to stay close to by the Dark Lord himself.

Among the Slytherins in their year, only Regulus, Isa and Amaryllis had continued with the subject. The class was small even across other years, meaning all four Houses sat together to fill the room. The only non-Slytherin Regulus recognised by name was Bones — the former Hufflepuff Seeker.

Regulus entered the classroom with the instructions from the Dark Lord clear in his mind — he had to stay close to Slughorn, to woo him, to be his favourite student.

So he'd better be on top of things, be the best in class.

Sure, the invitations to the Slug Club had been a fact since fifth year — just his surname had ensured that. But to stand out, to be the best, his favourite, he had to do more than just carry the Black name.

So, Regulus had already gone over much of the textbook for the year when he settled at a table with Isa, Amaryllis and some girl from Hufflepuff.

Slughorn entered the room with his usual joviality, greeting students warmly, his belly shaking with laughter at some inside joke only he seemed to understand. He gave a brief speech about the expectations of N.E.W.T. students, the complexity of their coursework, the importance of focus — nothing surprising.

Then, he dropped the part that *was* surprising, the one thing that mattered.

"This year," Slughorn declared, beaming, "we will be introducing an advanced Potions group — beyond N.E.W.T. level. A select few will have the opportunity to study more complicated brews, some even beyond the standard curriculum. There will be a tutoring component as well, for those of you considering mastery in the art."

Regulus immediately sat up straighter.

This was his chance.

He *had* to be part of this.

Oh, to be part of an advanced group led by Slughorn — even more exclusive than his dinner parties.

It was perfect.

Slughorn smiled indulgently at the class. "Now, of course, not everyone can join — only three students per House will be selected. Participation is voluntary. If you wish to be considered, simply add your name to the list." He tapped a long parchment on his desk. "My quill will determine who makes the cut."

Regulus barely heard the rest — his mind was whirling.

He *had* to get into this group.

Before he could rush up to sign his name, Slughorn waved his wand and instructions appeared on the board.

Their first potion of the year was Felix Felicis; Liquid Luck.

Regulus had already studied the ingredients over the summer, and now, looking at them again, he reaffirmed what he had concluded back then — it wasn't that difficult to make.

As they began gathering ingredients, he turned to Isa. "So, Nott — are you going to sign up?"

Isa snorted. "Do you *know* how many subjects I'm taking, Reg?"

Regulus rolled his eyes. "I really want to join," he said, earning a frown from Isa. "So, come on — do it for me. Join with me."

Isa shot him a sceptical look as she carefully measured out powdered moonstone.

Regulus pressed on. "Look, there are only three of us in the whole class. That means it'll be you, me, and Amaryllis — it will be nice. And well, we always take our courses together."

"We *don't*, actually," Isa pointed out matter-of-factly. "I've always taken Divination, which you haven't, for example."

"Details, details," Regulus dismissed. "We've always taken *my* courses together. Who am I supposed to sit next to without you?"

Isa sighed and arched a brow. "And what do I get in return, Black?"

Regulus sighed, mentally running through a list of things Isa liked — things he could offer.

Well, there was one thing.

"A foot rub."

Isa snorted. "*One* foot rub for an *entire year* of extra classes? You're *delusional*."

"Fine." Regulus exhaled, growing impatient. "Every week. A foot rub

every week."

Isa crossed her arms, mulling it over. "Twice a week. Thirty minutes each."

Regulus groaned. He knew Isa would hold him to it.

"Alright, Nott — deal."

They formally shook hands before turning back to their cauldron.

Regulus could barely suppress his satisfaction. Slughorn had just handed him the *perfect* opportunity to impress him, to become his *favourite*, to carry out the task the Dark Lord had set for him. And he'd become part of the group anyhow — there were only three Slytherins in the class to begin with; precisely the number of students allowed to sign up.

And with Isa joining too, it wouldn't be that bad too, either.

Regulus smirked.

*****

Getting back into the rhythm of Hogwarts — classes, the constant noise of hundreds of students, and the general chaos of daily life — meant that Regulus's mind was at least partially too preoccupied to dwell on James all the time. The nightmares helped in a way, too; they left him so exhausted that beyond the necessities, he barely had the energy to think about anything else.

Besides this, there was the Captaincy.

With last year's International Tournament, Hogwarts naturally had fielded just one team, meaning House teams had been on hold. And since Regulus had been the only Slytherin on the team, and since, in the meantime, several former players had graduated, Regulus had no clue who was even left — any hidden talent, anyone remotely decent; it was all one big mystery.

So, he'd booked the pitch for tryouts on Saturday morning and pinned a parchment to the common room notice board, asking interested students to sign up. Now, on Friday evening, he sat in the usual corner of the Slytherin common room, scanning the list.

The group had naturally claimed their usual spots. Regulus was

sprawled on the worn green sofa, parchment in one hand, his elbow resting on the armrest as Mulciber and Avery sat left from him. Isa lounged in an armchair across from them, legs crossed as she read, while Evan and Melania occupied the loveseat next to her. Amaryllis and Barty had both claimed their own chairs, their legs hanging lazily over the armrests.

Barty and Evan were in the midst of a heated discussion with Mulciber and Avery over what topic they should push for next week's Defence lesson; duelling being the frontrunner, although Mulciber was making a rather strong case for counter-curses. Amaryllis and Melania were deep in conversation, while Snape and Isa were both reading, completely immersed by their texts and thus ignoring the rest of the group.

Regulus, however, had stopped reading.

His eyes flicked over the list once more. He turned the parchment over, as if that might somehow make it shorter.

It didn't.

It was obscenely long.

He scowled.

"How the *hell* am I supposed to let all these people try out in a single morning?" he complained, holding up the parchment in exasperation. "Do we even *have* this many students between second and seventh year?"

Mulciber reached over and plucked the parchment from his hands, his brow furrowing as Avery and Evan leaned in to look as well.

Mulciber let out a low whistle. "No clue, mate," he said after a moment, shaking his head.

Hearing this, Melania and Amaryllis exchanged a glance before reaching forward and swiping the parchment for themselves. They skimmed through the list quickly, eyebrows raising in unison.

Melania snorted. "Alright, so I see at least… three girls from Hufflepuff—"

"And *two* first-year Slytherins," Amaryllis added, smirking.

“Oh, and this one’s a *Ravenclaw*,” Melania continued. “And here — another one.”

Barty and Evan erupted into laughter.

Regulus felt his patience snap. “Are they taking the piss or something?” he shot, snatching the parchment back and shooting Barty — now doubling over in laughter — a withering glare. “They *know* they can’t bloody join the team, right?”

Even Snape had finally looked up from his book. Isa, however, had not moved — her attention was still fixed on her reading, seemingly unfazed by the conversation.

Amaryllis nodded, her voice smooth and matter-of-fact. “Well, it’s a well-known, rather clever technique, Regulus — subliminal imprinting.”

Regulus blinked at her. “What?”

Amaryllis arched an eyebrow. “You know, you’ve *seen* their names now, so you’ll take notice if you come across them again.”

Regulus frowned, genuinely perplexed. “Why the *hell* would I want to notice their names?”

Melania bit back an uncomfortable laugh, as if unsure whether Regulus was being serious or intentionally dense.

“I think…” she hesitated, throwing a glance at Amaryllis before finishing delicately, “they *want* you to notice them.”

Regulus narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

Barty smirked wickedly, leaning back in his chair, arms folded behind his head. “Who’s gonna tell him?” he drawled, eyes practically gleaming with amusement.

Regulus shot him a suspicious glare. “Tell me *what*?”

Isa let out a long-suffering sigh. Finally, she turned a page in her book and, without so much as glancing up, stated, “You’re fit, Reg.”

Regulus froze.

For a beat, silence stretched over the group.

Isa finally looked up from her book, her expression unreadable.

Regulus stared at her in horrified discomfort. “You think I’m *fit*?”

Isa exhaled slowly, visibly suppressing a look of exasperation, and promptly ignored the question, instead directing her gaze toward Amaryllis and Melania as if she had far better things to be doing.

“I think it’s convention, Regulus,” Amaryllis said, her tone serious.

Regulus choked.

He pointedly ignored Barty and Evan, who were howling with laughter, Evan actually clapping his hands in delight.

“You were voted one of the Big Six for a reason,” Amaryllis added, utterly serious.

Severus frowned. “The Big Six?”

Regulus immediately turned to Isa, triumphant — so he *wasn’t* the only one who didn’t bother with this nonsense.

Evan, however, was all too happy to explain. “It’s a… competition, of sorts,” he said, smirking. “Every year, the six fittest blokes at Hogwarts get called the Big Six.”

“Nominations start next week,” Barty added matter-of-factly, surprisingly without a single hint of shame. “Then there’s two weeks to collect votes, and then the results are announced.”

Regulus turned to him with narrowed eyes. “You’re awfully well-informed.”

Barty shrugged. “Well, Eira is on the committee.”

Isa smirked. “Oh, so you might actually stand a chance this year.”

Evan snorted. “That’s nepotism, Crouch.”

Barty scoffed. “No, I will be nominated for my sheer natural appeal—”

Regulus let their conversation fade into background noise as he turned back to his parchment, rubbing his temples.

This was going to be hell.

He shoved the list into Amaryllis's hands with a sigh. "Just — mark who's actually eligible, will you?"

Barty and Evan, of course, sniggered.

"Oh, Black," Barty drawled, his grin wicked. "Let them try out. Let them *woo* their way onto your team. Who knows—" he stretched his arms lazily over his head, smirking, "—they might get… *creative*."

Regulus shot him a murderous glare, but it did nothing to stop the uproarious laughter that followed.

A shudder crawled down his spine.

This was definitely going to be hell.

*****

The next morning, Regulus woke up earlier than normal — with all the stress about the tryouts, he'd slept even worse than usual. When he'd woken up in the middle of the night, soaked in sweat and tears, he'd contemplated taking a Dreamless Sleep Potion — but had then decided against it, knowing it would make him sluggish on the pitch, especially as he didn't take them regularly anymore. So instead, he had forced himself to endure the torture, shaking and panting through the night, and had gotten out of bed as soon as the sky outside had turned from ink-black to the soft grey of dawn.

Quietly, he'd put on his kit, cast the concealing spell for the Mark, and made his way to the Great Hall. Pathetically, he was the *first* one at breakfast. He'd been early before, but never the first; he was always beaten by — or had beaten depending on one's view on things — some swots from Ravenclaw.

He sat alone, his plate barely touched. His stomach was tight with nerves, though he forced himself to eat — he needed the energy, especially after this horrible night. His mind kept running over the same thoughts in an endless loop.

He had to compose a team — and under the watchful eyes of whoever decided to show up.

Then, he had to *lead* the team. Make decisions. Think strategies. *Lead*.

God, he wasn't made to lead. He was made to *follow*.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

He was only halfway through his eggs — forcing himself to chew without tasting — when the heavy doors creaked open, breaking the quiet, and a familiar group came sauntering in, looking groggy but equally cheerful.

“What are *you* doing here?” Regulus asked, baffled, at the sight of Evan, Barty, Mulciber, Avery, Melania and Isa joining him at the table.

Evan was the first to reach him, clapping a firm hand on his shoulder. “Supporting you, of course, Cap.”

Regulus blinked. He looked up at the group, staring at them in stunned disbelief. They’d woken up at this unholy hour — for him.

His throat went unexpectedly dry.

Isa flopped down beside him with an easy grin, ruffling his hair before he could swat her away. “Ah, I think Reg is lost for words,” she snorted, laughing as she leaned her head against his shoulder. “ Can’t have you handling that endless list of names all by yourself, now can we?”

Regulus rolled his eyes, but warmth flickered in his chest. He smiled at her — genuine, soft — before ruffling her hair in return.

After breakfast, the group made their way down to the pitch, their footsteps crunching against the dewy grass. Amaryllis and Severus joined them halfway, slipping into the group seamlessly.

The air was crisp and Regulus felt the tension rise in his chest with every footstep he took nearer to the locker room. Inside, he lingered for a while, pacing. Luckily the others had gone to the stands — or at least, Mulciber, Avery, Severus and the girls — leaving only Barty and Evan by his side, flanking him like sentries.

When they finally stepped outside, Regulus was met with a sight that nearly knocked the breath out of him.

Dozens of students were gathered on the pitch, waiting for tryouts to begin. Some were stretching, others shifting nervously, chatting in hushed tones. And beyond them, in the stands, were the watchers.

His gaze flicked instinctively over the crowd in the stands. He spotted

his friends, chatting and laughing amicably, close to Eira, Celine and their friends. The Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff Captains were there too, eyeing the pitch intently with their friends beside them.

And then, unbidden, Regulus's eyes landed on red jumpers.

His breath caught.

Sirius, the werewolf, Pettigrew, a group of Gryffindor girls…

And James.

A visceral, unshakable reaction tore through him — raw and immediate. Heat pooled in his stomach, spreading through his veins just as quickly as the nerves.

James was here.

Of course, James would be here.

He was the rival Captain, after all — he *had* to be here. But, Regulus knew, deep down, that that wasn't why James was there. And he knew, too, that James wouldn't just be watching. He would be cheering for him.

Regulus swallowed hard, forcing himself to snap back to reality. He exhaled sharply, dragging his focus back to the crowd in front of him.

Barty leaned in, voice low in his ear. "Alright, so… how do you want to do this?"

Regulus's voice was tight, his stomach knotting. "I have no bloody clue."

Evan and Barty exchanged a knowing look. Evan nodded once, as if this was what he'd expected. "We can work with that."

Barty, with an unfair air of smugness and confidence, snatched the parchment from Regulus's hands and stepped forward. His voice rang across the pitch.

"All right, people! First of all — all the first years can sod off."

A chorus of groans followed as a few younger students slinked off.

Barty barely waited before continuing, "Same goes for anyone from *other Houses* — yes."

More groans and more reluctant departures followed, shrinking the group a bit.

Evan took over next. “Now that we’ve gotten rid of the riff-raff, our dear Captain will disclose which position will be tried out first.”

Evan and Barty both turned to Regulus expectantly.

Regulus cleared his throat awkwardly. “Yes, well — thanks. Welcome, everyone. We’ll be starting with Beater.”

*****

The process moved surprisingly smoothly. The Beaters were chosen first — a decision made with almost no deliberation: the Carrow twins. Regulus knew them — he’d recently attended a Meeting with their father, after all — but he hadn’t realised they were such skilled Beaters. They worked seamlessly together, their coordination likely instinctual, a product of their twin bond.

The Keeper trials followed. Regulus sent the potential Chasers into the air to test their shots, evaluating each Keeper’s ability under pressure. Eventually, the choice became clear: Dorian Lively, a seventh-year whom Regulus occasionally saw in the company of Mulciber, Avery, and Severus, but beyond that, knew little about.

The final selection — the Chasers — was the hardest. With three players, the number of possible combinations stretched the process considerably. The trio had to work together, to click, to become a well-oiled machine. Especially considering that Gryffindor would certainly retain Potter and the Macmillan sisters as their Chasing trio — and much better than that, they didn’t come, at least not at Hogwarts.

Regulus once again realised how much he lived in his own bubble when he failed to recognise most of the students trying out; their faces blurred past him, indistinct. Still — three stood out.

Cassius Flint, a fifth-year, was familiar from Pureblood circles. Helen Riley, a kind-looking blonde seventh-year, displayed solid technical skills. But the most surprising — and, frankly, the most impressive — was Charlotte Miller. A second-year, practically a child — yet she was fast, ruthless, and impossibly precise. She handled a Quaffle as if she’d learned to fly before she could walk.

By the end of the morning, Regulus was confident he had assembled a

strong team and called for them to gather in the locker room

“You all did well,” he said, voice steady, slowly easing into the role of leader. “We have the pitch every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday morning. Be there — fit and awake.”

Then, a little awkwardly— “My friends are throwing a party tonight in the common room. No clue why. But in the spirit of team bonding… you’re all welcome.”

As the team began to disperse, Regulus’s gaze flicked to the second-year girl, lingering at the back of the group.

He cleared his throat. “Miller.”

She turned, green eyes wide.

Before he could think better of it, he blurted out, “You’re brilliant. And at your age… that’s impressive. You must’ve played a lot growing up.”

Miller flushed, shifting on her feet. “…Thank you.”

Something about her discomfort sent an odd pang through him. Against his better judgment, he attempted to ease the tension with small talk — which, truth to be told, in his case, was *always* a bad call.

“I don’t recognise your family name. Is there anyone I’d know?”

Slytherin was filled with people Regulus had known since childhood. Even the rare unfamiliar name usually had some connection — a distant relative in the Ministry, a Quidditch star, someone with a place in their world.

Miller’s blush deepened. She hesitated, looking almost… afraid. “No… I don’t think so. My parents are… Muggles.”

Regulus stiffened.

A Mudblood in *Slytherin*?

He knew it happened — occasionally. But to actually talk to one… and one who flew like she had been born for it…

He cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably. “…Alright. Then no, I wouldn’t know anyone.”

Miller bit her lip. Her voice was quiet. “That… that’s not a problem, is it?”

Regulus blinked. “What? No. Of course not.”

She visibly relaxed.

Realisation struck him. “You thought it would be?”

She hesitated, then nodded shyly. “Yes… I guess.”

Regulus frowned. “No, no, of course not. Your flying is *brilliant* — some practice and you might be the best on the team.”

Her blush deepened. “Thank you, Captain Black.”

Regulus froze.

Captain Black.

No, no, *no* — that was *not* going to be a thing.

He thought of Barty and Evan and made a mental note to put a stop to it before they heard about it and ran with it.

God, no, he wouldn’t hear the end of it.

Chapter 5: Of Hollowness & Happiness

Chapter Notes

> As promised - a quick update, since I felt this chapter and the previous one sort of... belong together.
>
> Enjoy ❤
>
> Now, I don't think TWs are really necessary still, but just in case - mind the warnings ;)

Regulus was still reeling from *Captain Black* as he stepped out of the locker room, the title echoing in his mind, making him shudder. He barely noticed Isa falling into step beside him, their strides naturally syncing as they walked back to the castle.

“So,” Isa started, “how do you feel about the team?”

Regulus ran a hand through his hair, exhaling. “Good,” he said, “I think we might actually stand a chance.”

Isa smiled. “Good.”

He nodded, shoving his hands into his pockets. “We’ll have to see after our first practice, though.”

They were mid-step, mid-conversation when Regulus felt it — a shift, a presence, something tugging at him like an invisible force.

Invisible but undeniable.

His heart stammered.

And then he saw him.

James was only a few feet away, walking in the opposite direction, head bent over a roll of parchment — probably the list of people trying out later that afternoon. He looked absorbed, his brows furrowed in concentration, lips parted ever so slightly.

His hair was, as always, a complete mess — Regulus knew without thinking that if he reached out, it would be impossibly soft. The sight of him, so sincere, so unguarded, sent a sharp jolt through Regulus’s chest.

Fuck.

He hadn't been this close to him in weeks.

As if sensing his gaze, James stopped dead in his tracks.

Regulus could hear the blood pounding in his ears.

James lifted his head, and their eyes met.

Regulus felt his breath hitch, his throat go dry. Everything else — the world, the castle, even Isa at his side — blurred into nothing. It was just James. James, looking at him with something raw, something that stripped Regulus down to his bones.

James spoke first, voice barely more than a breath. *" Reg."*

Regulus swallowed. "James."

Silence stretched between them, thick, electric. Neither moved. Neither *could* move. Isa, utterly forgotten, glanced between them, her eyes darting back and forth like she'd just stumbled into something she wasn't meant to witness.

James was the first to break the moment, clearing his throat before a slow, genuine smile curved his lips. "I knew you'd get the captaincy."

Warmth flickered in Regulus's chest. "You too, Captain," he managed, his voice softer than he meant too.

Their gazes locked again, something unspoken passing between them — the familiarity, the history, the memories, the most recent being him in his bed—

I love you too, Reg.

Their limbs tangled, the quiet breathing of James as he lay on Regulus's chest, completely at peace, so serene and beautiful. Well, at least, until Isa had woken th—

Fuck. Isa.

Reality snapped back into place with brutal force.

Cursing himself, he nodded at James — brief, sharp, the safest way to sever whatever was happening — before turning on his heel. He ignored Isa's face entirely.

But she'd seen. Of course, she had.

Isa was too sharp, too perceptive, to have missed this — this crackling, unspeakable thing. Even Selwyn would have noticed the air shifting around them, the way the world had folded in on itself for a moment.

Regulus winced at the reality of anyone — and worse, Isa – witnessing something so private and intimate.

He did everything in his power to suppress the burning in his face as he kept avoiding her gaze. He walked in silence, rigid and purposeful, refusing to acknowledge her presence at his side.

They had reached the stairs leading down to the dungeons when, in a moment of weakness, Regulus glanced at her.

Isa was already looking at him.

Her expression was unreadable at first, but then — something flickered. A mixture of wryness and understanding. Her gaze held the kind of knowing that made Regulus's stomach turn — like she had seen right through him, stripped him bare in an instant.

"What?" Regulus groaned, rolling his eyes in an attempt to look unfazed, to get past the embarrassment.

She shot him a small, wry small as she tilted her head slightly, considering him.

"Nothing," she said, her voice quiet and laced with something almost…. sad.

Regulus nodded firmly, ignoring the way his chest tightened, and moved forward.

*****

Although he couldn't put it into words, couldn't really fantom it, let alone decipher it, the feeling James had left him with didn't fade for the rest of the night.

And that while distractions were plenty — Barty, Evan, Mulciber and Avery had really outdone themselves in arranging the combined Back-to-Hogwarts and Reg-for-Cap party — especially with Eira and her friends joining forces.

Green and silver drapes hung from the ceiling, banners were strung across the common room, one more atrocious than the other — Regulus shuddered at the realisation that his friends had dug up the *No flop with Black on top!* and *The more Black, the more Crack!* banners.

Drinks and snacks were scattered across every available surface with bottles tucked between stacks of books and half-finished essays. The Wireless in the corner was blasting lively music, handled with great enthusiasm — and questionable taste, but alas — by Mulciber and Avery. A makeshift dance floor had formed in the centre of the room, and a shadowy alcove in the back had already become the designated snogging spot.

It was still early when the first casualties emerged — two fourth-years, victims of a drinking challenge undoubtedly set by Mulciber and Barty, had to be dragged off to bed.

God, it was a good thing Slughorn was too gullible to check the common room for parties and illegal liquor.

Regulus didn't enjoy it, though. Something in his chest felt hollow — like he was missing something vital. The laughter, the banter, the jokes, the music, the warmth — it should have been enough, should have cheered him up. But it wasn't and it didn't.

He was so desperate to feel it — the joy, the happiness — that he'd even resorted to a source he always left untouched; he'd tried Barty's Firewhiskey and Mulciber's Magnificent Mead thinking that if alcohol had been enough to drag him back to reality after witnessing four people die, a drink or two could have him at least enjoy a party partially thrown in his honour.

It hadn't worked, though — it had only made him thirsty and a little dizzy.

He got the distinct feeling that his friends had been instructed — by Isa — to cheer him up, but as the night wore on, they had their own happiness to pursue, and Regulus found himself on a sofa, facing the dancefloor directly, as if he were an audience watching the stage.

A butterbeer dangled from his fingers. He was flanked by Evan on the left, leaning back, stretching out like a cat, swirling the Veela Vodka in his glass. Severus sat to Regulus's right, as always present and pleasant but keeping himself in the background of things.

Regulus's gaze drifted toward the dance floor.

Amaryllis, Melania, and Isa were in their element — moving recklessly, hair whipping, skirts swirling, their laughter sharp and unrestrained. Melania twirled Amaryllis, both of them glowing with the confidence of girls who knew they had the room's attention. Isa, caught somewhere between them, laughed so hard she had to clutch onto Amaryllis for balance.

Nearby, Barty and Eira danced as well, eyeing the trio with a look of restrained amusement.

And then—

Isa's gaze caught his.

Regulus lifted his bottle to his lips, taking a slow sip.

He didn't miss the way Evan glanced at him from the corner of his eye.

Isa didn't break her gaze. Mischief twinkled there. A challenge.

Regulus barely had time to react before she broke away from the other girls, stumbling slightly as she made her way over, golden hair loose, cheeks flushed, her smile wide and tipsy.

"Come dance with me, Black," she declared, grabbing his wrist. "You need to loosen up."

Regulus exhaled. "No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

"Isa."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, for Merlin's sake." Then, without further argument, she yanked him up with surprising strength.

Evan sniggered loudly. Regulus shot him a sharp glare before sighing and setting his butterbeer aside, letting Isa drag him toward the dance floor.

Truth be told, it wasn't so bad.

Dancing with Isa was never was — they moved easily together, Isa leading first until Regulus took over. She was a good dancer, graceful and confident, and as always, utterly unbothered by whoever was watching. She twirled herself, laughing, bumping her shoulder into his in an attempt to make him smile.

Then the song changed, and the tempo slowed.

All around them, bodies drew closer — not that Regulus particularly noticed anything beyond the space he and Isa occupied.

Isa, undeterred, stepped in, resting her hands on his shoulders, guiding his to her waist.

"You should be happy," she murmured as they swayed. "Celebrating. You've formed a team."

Regulus smiled — small, controlled, meant to assure her. "I am happy."

Isa hummed. "Mm."

She knew perfectly well he wasn't — he was many things, but happy was not one of them.

She pressed closer, her head resting lightly against his chest. She smelled warm — vanilla and lavender — familiar, comfortable.

Then, softly, she murmured, "It'll pass, you know, Reg."

His breath hitched.

She pulled back just enough to look at him, her fingers brushing his cheek, her brown eyes warm and knowing .

"It — it will get better. With time."

Regulus swallowed. His throat was dry.

He forced another smile, small, tired. "Yeah. Thanks, Ies."

They held each other's gaze for a moment — hers, open, deep and understanding, his, unreadable but grateful.

He was acutely aware of her fingers brushing the sharp line of his jaw,

of the closeness of her breath when—

“ *Isa!* ”

Amaryllis’s voice cut through the quiet, breaking… well, whatever this was.

Isa blinked, glancing toward the call. Regulus exhaled, stepping back, his hands falling to his sides.

“Go,” he murmured, nodding toward Amaryllis.

She hesitated. Then, giving his hand a brief squeeze, she turned, letting Amaryllis pull her into an embrace before disappearing back into the crowd.

Regulus lingered for a second longer.

He’d be better off going to bed.

*****

Unfortunately, once he set foot inside the dormitory, it became clear that Barty and Eira had beaten him to it, and the annoying giggling of Eira Warrington was enough to make Regulus turn sharply on his heel.

Still, with Evan now occupying a secluded corner with Melania, Amaryllis and Isa tipping into drunkenness, Severus gone and Mulciber and Avery chasing after Eira’s friends, Regulus felt more alone and out of place than ever.

So, as if on autopilot, as if instinct had overridden thought, he slipped out of the common room, out of the dungeons, up through the castle’s silent corridors.

Only when he opened the door to the third floor Charms classroom, did his mind catch up with his feet.

The room was exactly the same — pouffes scattered about, cushions tossed carelessly, tables shoved to one side. The only difference was the absence of James’s projector.

Regulus exhaled.

He was being stupid. His friends were throwing a party — with liquor, laughter and banter — partially for him and here he was, in the

middle of the night, in a classroom on the third floor, drowning in his own thoughts and pity rather than celebrating with them.

He cursed under his breath and turned back toward the door, ready to return to the dungeons.

But then—

The door creaked open.

He felt it before he saw him.

James.

Entering the room, closing the door behind him, only inches away from Regulus, looking so maddingly beautiful in his red pullover.

Regulus's breath hitched, his throat went dry. His pulse, which had been steady a moment ago, now pounded like a maddening war drum sounding in his ribs.

He knew he had to step back, had to leave *now*, had to be wise, prudent, reasonable.

But in that sliver of time, he felt more whole, more complete than he'd felt for weeks. By just standing in front of him, looking into his eyes, he felt more alive than he'd done ever since James had visited Black Manor.

"I guess you had a party too?" James asked, a playful lilt in his voice, undoubtedly in an attempt to break the tension.

Regulus nodded, lost for words.

"Was it fun?"

Regulus arched a brow. "Are we really going to discuss parties, James?"

James shook his head.

And then—

Then Regulus let resignation master him, wash through him, take over every inch and part of his body, mind and soul.

He stepped forward, cupped James's face, and kissed him.

He didn't care anymore — didn't have a care for the world, for who he was supposed to be, where he was ought to be, what he was meant to do.

The only thing that mattered was this moment, this feeling, this reality — him and James. The reality of the immeasurable, unfathomable love that Regulus carried for him. For his laugh, his kind words, his beautifully familiar body.

Regulus kissed him hard. Desperate. Tender and teasing, all at once.

James gasped, and Regulus devoured the sound, backing him into the door, fisting the front of his jumper to steady them both. He ran his tongue along James's lower lip, teasing, drawing another sharp inhale from him that sent a jolt of heat pooling low in Regulus's stomach, hot and aching.

His hands pushed under James's jumper, the familiar feeling of hot, muscular skin enough to shoot raw heat through Regulus's body once more.

James groaned, tipping his head back, lips parting as Regulus kissed along his jaw, then down his neck.

Oh, he was so utterly, damningly lost.

All reservations, every faint trace of sensibility vanished as he felt James, hard and aroused, grinding against him, the friction pushing Regulus even further away from this world, this dimension, this reality.

He had no idea where to leave it, where to go with it — the love, the hurt, the sadness — but here; kissing James, trailing his fingers over his body, taking in the familiarity, the comfort of all that he had to offer.

James's hands moved, reaching for the fastenings of his robes, fingers toying with the fabric.

No.

This — them — deserved better. The sacredness of them, of what they were about to do, of how close they were about to become — it deserved better than a cold, dark, abandoned classroom.

Besides, if he was going to sin, he was going to do it thoroughly,

properly — enjoying every single part of it, deeply and unrestrained.

Regulus caught James's wrist, stilling him.

James pulled back just enough to look at him, surprised — lips parted, chest rising and falling too fast.

Regulus swallowed hard, pulse a heavy, insistent *thud* in his throat.

"Let's go to the seventh floor."

James blinked, his lips still parted, catching his breath. "Should we?"

Regulus met his gaze. "No. We shouldn't."

Silence stretched between them.

James inhaled. Then—

"Let's go."

He grabbed his cloak and swung it over them both, draping it carefully, enclosing them in a pocket of warmth and secrecy. With James so close, warm, and literally shielded from the world, Regulus felt salvaged — safer than he had in such a long time.

They left the classroom, walking cautiously, wordlessly. Every step closer to the seventh floor added to the heat under the cloak, intensifying the prickling desire to be even closer.

Barely fitting under the cloak, Regulus led the way with James behind closely.

Very closely.

James's breath was hot against the nape of his neck, each slow, steady exhale sending shivers down his spine. His fingers brushed Regulus's sides, seemingly innocent — except Regulus knew they weren't. Every touch, every shift under the cloak was deliberate.

Halfway up the staircase to the seventh floor, Regulus felt James shift behind him — just slightly, subtly, but enough for the unmistakable hardness of James settling against the curve of Regulus's back.

The effect was immediate — Regulus flinched at the sheer desire, want, desperation that violently shot through him, knowing that James was hard, aching against him.

Regulus choked on his breath.

James didn't move away — if anything, he leaned in more.

Regulus bit down hard on the inside of his cheek, gripping the banister with unnecessary force as they ascended the last flight of stairs.

His skin felt too tight. His pulse was too fast. Every nerve in his body screamed with want, with the desire, the desperation to strip him down, taste him, feel him everywhere.

The door barely had time to click shut behind them before everything blurred into heat. Into hands, desperate and grasping. Into mouths, colliding in feverish, open-mouthed kisses. Into gasps swallowed between their lips, low moans muffled by the press of their bodies.

The room looked exactly like it had the last time – a bed in the middle of the room, a small bathroom adjacent to it.

Regulus registered none of it.

The only thing he could focus on was James — *James*, pressing him back, working his robes from his shoulders, hands firm and unwavering.

The world spun as they stripped each other bare, clothing hitting the floor. James's jumper was tugged over his head, his jeans unfastened and pushed down, leaving him in nothing but his boxers.

Regulus swallowed hard, breath unsteady, as James mirrored him — undoing the buttons of his shirt, dragging the fabric away. His fingers brushed over the bare skin of Regulus's stomach, down lower, undoing his belt, his slacks slipping from his hips.

And then—

Stillness.

For a moment, they just stood there, stripped down to nearly nothing, staring.

Standing in nothing but his boxers, his hair a mess, his brown eyes warm, loving, and desperate — James was breathtaking. The sight sent a lump to Regulus's throat, a sensation almost painful.

He swallowed, drinking in the way James's gaze burned into him.

How his chest rose and fell heavily, lips slightly parted. The glint in his eyes that screamed he wanted him, had him, cherished him.

Regulus's stomach tightened. His breath caught.

Then—

James sank to his knees.

Regulus let his eyes flutter closed, exhaling shakily.

Fuck.

He knew what was coming. Knew the feeling of James's mouth, warm and wet and all-consuming, knew it was going to drive him to the very edge of coherence.

His pulse thundered as James hooked his fingers into the waistband of his boxers, tugging them down slowly, deliberately.

And then — heat.

James's mouth on him, lips parting around him, tongue trailing from the base to the tip, slow, torturous.

Regulus groaned, fingers instinctively finding their way into James's hair. He didn't grip, didn't force, just cradled softly, guiding him tenderly.

James moaned softly around him, the vibrations sending a violent shudder through Regulus's entire body. His thighs tensed, his breathing turned ragged, and every nerve felt ablaze.

He wasn't going to last — not like this. Not with the feeling of James around him, or the sight of him beneath him.

It was too fucking much.

Regulus gasped, pulling back with a sharp inhale, every muscle trembling and protesting.

He didn't speak — just pulled James up, guided him gently to the bed and pressed him down onto the mattress.

They kissed again — slowly, deeply.

He had never felt a force of emotions coursing through him as fiercely

as he did now; arousal pooled low in his stomach, molten and insistent, making him harder than ever before. But it wasn't just that, wasn't just heat — there was an undeniable sensation of appreciation, of love, of tenderness that filled Regulus's chest, that stretched through every fiber of him, demanding to be known, to be felt, to be given in return. Never had he experienced it so intensely — a primal rush and a slow tenderness, so beautifully intertwined.

Regulus moved lower, kissing his way down James's chest, over the ridges of his stomach, until he reached the waistband of his boxers. James shivered as Regulus dragged them down, as his hands smoothed over his thighs before taking him into his mouth.

James's head fell back against the pillows with a groan, fingers fisting into the sheets. He arched instinctively, beautifully, his breath hitching as Regulus did everything that he knew James liked, everything he knew would drive him mad, push him to the edge.

He had to be careful, though — every shift of his own hips against the sheets sent sharp sparks of pleasure coiling low in his stomach, dangerously close to breaking him.

And he didn't want it to end this way.

He pulled off with a soft gasp, forehead resting briefly against James's hip, trying to steady himself.

James's hand slid into his hair, gentle.

Regulus swallowed thickly, then lifted his head, meeting James's gaze.

"I want to feel you in me."

A flicker of something emotional passed through James's eyes — longing, arousal and something unmistakably tender.

He nodded.

Wordlessly, he reached for his wand.

Regulus climbed onto the bed, breath shallow as James settled behind him, close, *so close*, warm lips pressing softly against the nape of his neck.

"You ready?" James whispered, voice hoarse, barely audible.

Regulus closed his eyes, exhaling slowly.

He was ready.

He was more ready than he had ever been. He hadn't thought it was possible, but it felt even better than the first time. Perhaps because now — now he knew. Knew what was coming, knew what it felt like to be completely consumed by James, to let the sensation of James driving into him seize him whole, pushing him into another dimension, another world, where there was nothing but pleasure and bliss. Perhaps because he knew that he'd be taken somewhere unreachable, a place beyond thought, beyond all that he was, he had been and was supposed to be, beyond anything he had ever imagined.

This time, he wasn't overwhelmed — he knew what was coming and he could *feel* it, deep and searing, sharp and real, saturating every part of him.

Each slow movement sent him spiralling into something vast, untethered. Every drag of James inside him, every shift of his hips, sent him further into some universe where only this — only James inside him, his arms around him, his moaning breath against him — existed.

He knew it wouldn't last long. Not with how deep the pleasure burned, how impossibly good he felt, and how good he knew it was going to be. It was already coiling inside him, tightening, *building*—

James's hand moved, ready to wrap around him, to push him over the edge—

But Regulus caught his wrist, fingers curling around it.

James stilled, a soft, questioning sound leaving his lips.

Regulus didn't explain — couldn't find a single letter in his head as the sensation left him completely, utterly lost for words. He just shook his head, breath shuddering, pressing James's hand away. Not yet. *Not yet.* He didn't want to fall so soon. He wanted to hold onto this, to feel it a little longer, to cherish it, savour it and devour it all.

James groaned, breath hot against Regulus's shoulder, his movements slowing just slightly.

"Oh, Reg," he moaned, his voice horse, wrecked, barely more than a pant. "How I've missed you, Reg."

Regulus let his head fall back against James's shoulder, his entire body

tight with pleasure.

"*Fuck, James, I— "*

It was too much.

James shifted, angling just right — *perfectly* — and then—

Regulus shattered.

Pleasure ripped through him, stealing his breath, sending shockwaves through every nerve, every inch of his body. He gasped, fingers clawing at the sheets, at James, at anything to keep him grounded, to keep him steady in this sensation of utter bliss, utter pleasure mastering him. It was so intense, so overwhelming, that he barely registered James's fingers digging into his hips, burying himself deep as he let go too.

They collapsed, spent and breathless, and for a long moment, they didn't move.

Regulus was weightless, mind empty, body boneless as he sank into the mattress, perfectly enveloped by James, still wrapped around him, still inside him.

Soft lips pressed against his neck — gentle, lingering.

James sighed, pressing another kiss against his shoulder, then another, his lips warm and tender.

Regulus had no idea how much time passed before he turned around, his face aligning perfectly with James's. He pulled the duvet over them, enclosing them in a cocoon of warmth against the cold of the room.

James looked beautiful. His hair was damp with sweat, his glasses resting on the nightstand, the muscles of his arm flexing as he carefully stroked Regulus's arm. He looked warm and satisfied, but there was an edge to it — a certain seriousness, a wryness in his eyes, something lingering between them that he couldn't quite name. But Regulus understood.

Because he felt it, too.

Felt, too, how they had crossed a line. How they were getting themselves tangled deeper and deeper in this intricate web of conflict,

of lies, of pretense.

How the world, how reality, was catching up with them — with whatever they had become, and that they couldn't ignore it any longer.

There was simply no way to justify this — for either of them.

Love made blind, but the world they lived in was so brutal, so unrelenting, that even the most foolish lover could not stay blind forever.

James, the only son to the heart of the modernists, and Regulus, the heir to the House of Black and one of the twelve initial Death Eaters.

There was simply no way to reconcile this — to make their bond, their love, transcend the reality of the world they lived in. They had been able to ignore it, tucked away in the sanctuary of a foreign school, had been able to brush it off as something to confront later, indulging the illusion that time would make it easier. But soon — soon James would graduate, and he would undoubtedly join Dumbledore's army. And Regulus — well, he was already part of the Dark Lord's ranks, wasn't he? He had been on missions, had fought, had duelled, had killed and had seen die.

God, no — James didn't even know the half of it.

Regulus had an inkling that James might've subtly fished with Sirius for ideas, answers, ways to interpret Severus's words — 'I know you sit with the Dark Lord'. James wouldn't have mentioned Regulus outright, but would've posed a hypothetical, a carefully veiled what-if, trying to find out through Sirius what 'sitting with the Dark Lord' meant, what it entailed and, most importantly, what it said about the person sitting with him. And Sirius, ever bitter and cynical about their world, would have answered with some remark indicating that there was always some torturous dinner or some terrible gathering where, almost accidentally, one could find themselves in the Dark Lord's company — so yes, Regulus included.

And with James knowing the lengths through which Regulus had gone, the extent to which he had put his own life at risk by freeing Davies, James probably believed, or at least desperately wanted to believe, that much of Regulus's role in the Revolution was incidental, partially forced, reluctant, and that beneath it all there was a goodness in Regulus — the goodness that James saw in him, the goodness that he desperately wanted to exist.

So, in the end, Regulus was fooling James just as much as he was fooling himself.

It wasn't just the Dark Lord's orders, his command that no one must know the depth of Regulus's ties, that kept Regulus silent — it was equally the knowledge that James wouldn't want him anymore, would close the door, would turn his back, would walk away if he knew. If he knew that Regulus had killed two people, had stood among the dying and done nothing, had taken the Mark and let it brand him forever—

James wouldn't love him anymore.

A strange, overwhelming sense of despair washed through him.

"You look tired," James murmured, voice soft and gentle.

Regulus followed the movement of James's fingers as they traced lazy patterns along his bare arm.

"Yeah," he sighed. "I'm knackered."

"I don't mean just now," James continued with a wry smile. "I mean in general."

Regulus hummed in response, barely registering the warmth spreading through him, only knowing that James was watching him, keeping an eye on him. His eyes fluttered shut at the sensation of James's fingers tracing slow, aimless patterns over his arm.

The last thing he felt was James pulling him closer, their bodies pressing together as James whispered against his ear, "Go to sleep, Reg."

*****

The next morning, for once, Regulus wasn't bothered by the fact that he had fallen asleep somewhere he shouldn't have, with someone he shouldn't be with.

No — he had slept better than he had in weeks. His mind had been quiet, blissfully blank. No nightmares, no terrors, no jolting awake in a cold sweat. He felt more rested than he had in ages, even though he had only slept for a few hours.

Besides, he knew his friends had been completely plastered the night

before, which meant he could easily claim to have crashed in the dorm and woken early to hit the library.

And with that knowledge, Regulus decided to make the most of it — to stay as long as he could without raising suspicion, to steal as many moments as possible before reality forced him to leave.

And enjoying it, he did.

He spent the entire afternoon in the room with James, forgetting about anything and everything. It almost felt like they were back at Beauxbatons, in their bubble, their safe haven where only the two of them existed, secluded and untouchable.

And Regulus laughed — laughed louder than he had in weeks, doubling over due to James's ridiculous retellings of pranks he'd pulled on his dad over the holidays. Laughed at James's dramatic impressions of the Gryffindor Quidditch tryouts from the day before. Laughed when James, with that signature mischievous glint in his eye, made him look for something — only for Regulus to stumble upon the small box he had gifted James long ago — with two cookies in it, endlessly regenerating after every crumb eaten. One James's mother's, the other Regulus's from when they'd made cookies at Black Manor.

And James, as always, knew. He always knew.

He felt better than anyone that there was so much, so many things, eating at his soul. Regulus knew that James saw it in his eyes, in the hollow, tired gaze that settled when the laughter faded, that James knew better than anyone that all he needed was his thoughts to shut off, his senses to be overwhelmed by nothing but love and warmth. So James took Regulus with him — to the safe, bright world he could paint with his stories about his Mum. Told him about a cake he'd once baked for his dad, provided an endless supply of stories about strolls, bedtime stories and tender wisdom that Euphemia Potter had bestowed upon her only son. And Regulus drowned in it, in the love, the warmth, the unconditionality that laced the stories, pretending it had been him, it had been his Mother, his childhood that James was talking about.

And they found their way over and into each other's bodies — kissing, cherishing, caressing, revering.

It was slower now, deeper. The desperate urgency of before had faded, that first frantic rush giving way to something softer, something unhurried. They took their time — their time to please, to enjoy, to

savour and take in.

James took him in the shower, hands skimming over slick skin, water cascading down their bodies, warm and enveloping. Naturally, they stumbled, slipping against the wet til — laughing breathlessly as they struggled to keep their balance. Luckily, James caught Regulus against the wall, their laughter vibrating between them, but the sheer ridiculousness of the attempt made them abandon the effort altogether. Dripping wet, still breathless from laughter, they tumbled out of the shower and into bed — completely soaked, leaving wet footprints on the floor, dampening the sheets as James took him again, slow and deep.

And through it all, the laughter, the jokes, the banter and the love, they kissed – endlessly, without restraint. Lips brushing, pressing, parting. Tongues meeting, teasing and tasting.

But yes, the outside world waited, and when the afternoon had stretched into the start of evening, they dressed in relative silence.

Regulus tugged on his robes, barely stifling a laugh as he caught sight of James in the mirror, battling his hopelessly unruly hair. James, noticing, shot him an annoyed look.

“Oh, shut up.”

Regulus only smirked, fastening the clasp at his throat.

James groaned suddenly, rubbing his face. “*Shit*. Quidditch practice is tonight.”

Regulus arched a brow, amused. “Gryffindor’s Captain speaking against practice? Positively *blasphemous*, Potter.”

“The team is great,” James defended, stretching his arms over his head, “I just hate Sunday evening practices.”

Regulus hummed. “Didn’t you schedule it on Monday?”

James frowned. “No, I—” He stopped, blinking. “Wait — you tried to schedule it on Monday?”

Regulus nodded, fixing the cuffs of his sleeves. “I did. But it was already occupied by you.” He shrugged. “I suppose it’s for the best — I can’t do Mondays anymore anyway with Slughorn’s class in the evening.”

James froze.

Regulus, catching the shift in the air, glanced at him through the mirror. “What?”

James’s expression was unreadable. “You mean—” He hesitated, then cleared his throat, “—you mean the extra N.E.W.T class? The one at seven o’clock?”

Regulus turned fully now, frowning. A strange sense of anxiety crept upon him. “Yeah. Why?”

James just looked at him for a beat, something flickering behind his eyes. Then—

“I’m taking that one too.”

Silence.

Regulus’s frown deepened. “What do you mean?” He narrowed his eyes. “You’re a year above me.”

James ruffled his hair — stupid, honestly, considering he’d just spent a solid thirty minutes trying to make something of it. “Yeah, but it’s an advanced N.E.W.T. course; sixth and seventh years combined.”

Regulus stilled. “That’s… strange,” he said slowly. “Isa, Amaryllis — Greengrass — and I all made the cut — if there’s only three per House, where are the seventh-year Slytherins?”

James shrugged. “Slughorn decided to pick three students per House, either sixth or seventh years. This year, it’s sixth-year Slytherins, seventh-year Ravenclaws, sixth-year Hufflepuffs, and… well, seventh-year Gryffindors.”

Regulus felt the blood drain from his face.

Still, it got worse.

James shifted awkwardly. “And, uh… you know he’s split the class, right?”

Regulus’s head snapped up. “What?”

James scratched the back of his neck, wincing. “Yeah. Monday nights are just for the Gryffindors and Slytherins.”

Regulus sat down heavily on the bed, something tense and awful creeping up his spine.

“Who else?” he asked, voice tight.

James swallowed. “Well… me. And Lily — Evans.”

Regulus closed his eyes briefly, inhaling through his nose. Bracing himself. “And?”

James hesitated. Then, with a slight wince—

“Sirius.”

Regulus let his head fall back onto the mattress with a dull thud.

“Oh, *fuck me*.”

Chapter 6: Of Brothers & Tact

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After sneaking out of the Come and Go Room, Regulus had actually gone to the library and borrowed a few books to sell his lie about spending the entire day there. None of his friends were likely to waste a Sunday after a party in the library — well, except perhaps for Severus and Isa. Given last night, Isa would definitely be hungover, so Regulus hoped it would be enough to keep her studying in the common room rather than venturing out. Severus, though, would be trickier — he didn't drink, meaning he'd already be fresh and alert by morning. Still, he kept to himself, and Regulus could easily claim they had just missed each other.

So, with surprising confidence, he walked from the library to the Great Hall for dinner.

As he walked through the corridors, he tried to reason with himself — tried to convince himself that agonising over the previous night wouldn't change a thing. It had happened. No, it shouldn't have. It had served no purpose other than making life, eventually, more complicated, but it had happened, and that was that. There was no undoing it, no erasing it, no taking it back. And it wasn't the end of the world; no one knew but him and James, and no one was going to find out — so life could just continue as it always had.

He entered the Great Hall, almost convinced of his own shaped reality, and saw his friends already digging into dinner.

The Sunday evening buzz filled the hall — students chatting in clusters, clinking plates, laughter and banter erupting at different tables. He passed the Carrow twins, nodding in greeting, and further down, caught sight of Miller sitting with two other girls. He tossed her a kind smile. She blinked in surprise before returning it, careful, hesitant — trying to hide the blush behind her dark, loose hair. Her friends immediately started whispering in hushed tones, giggling.

Regulus slid into his usual seat and immediately felt his friends' eyes flick from him to Miller and back again.

It wasn't surprising — Regulus rarely acknowledged anyone outside

their group, let alone an anonymous second-year.

Barty leaned in with a smirk. "Who's your girlfriend, Black?"

Regulus snorted. "That's one of my Chasers — you know, the insanely good one."

Barty and Evan exchanged a glance, looking mildly perplexed.

"Huh," Evan said. "Didn't recognise her."

Regulus shrugged. "It's the loose hair. When they fly, they always... you know, tie it back."

Amaryllis raised an eyebrow. "She a firstborn? I don't think I know a Miller in Slytherin."

Not eager to dive into the blood status of Miller, Regulus shrugged and decided to steer the conversation elsewhere. "So … you lot out of the wood yet?"

Isa groaned, rubbing her temple. "Technically, yes. But this headache…"

Barty scoffed with an air of indifference. "I've had worse."

Evan, eyeing the books tucked under Regulus's arm, smirked. "Maybe we should follow Black's example and stop drinking. Spending the whole day in the library while we're rotting away in our beds."

Severus, cutting into his meal, glanced up with a frown. "You were in the library? I didn't see you in our spot."

Shit. So he was right — Severus had been in the library.

Regulus needed only a fraction of a second to compose himself before answering. "Ah, yes," he nodded, carefully choosing that moment to pile his plate with food. "I sat somewhere else — closer to the stacks I got these books from."

Severus seemed unconvinced but merely gave a small nod before returning to his food.

Evan frowned slightly. "Didn't see you come into the dorm, though."

"You lot were obscenely plastered, Rosier," Regulus replied dryly.

Barty and Evan exchanged a glance, smirked and then nodded. "Yeah, true."

Regulus ignored the way Isa's eyes lingered on him and, more importantly, refused to look toward the Gryffindor table as he tucked into his food.

*****

The next day, Regulus felt restless — neither classes, nor the impossibly difficult essay he had to write for Runes could distract him from the looming reality that, after dinner, he would find himself in the company of Isa, Amaryllis, Evans, James *and* Sirius.

The thought only made him positively nauseous.

Really, the only thing that could've made it worse was the presence of the werewolf, too.

Isa — who knew about him and James in a painfully intimate way. James — whom he'd spent the night with just the day prior, kissing him everywhere, moaning his name in the most breathtaking way possible. And who — truth be told — always acted like a complete prat around Isa. Evans — whom Regulus had found himself in a car with, driving through Muggle London. His brother — who could know nothing about all of this and carried his own troubled history with Regulus. And then there was Amaryllis — whose presence was seemingly harmless but dangerous in its own way, being the ever-cheerful girl with a little too much knowledge about everyone from all Houses and a long history of friendliness with Sirius.

Regulus was uncharacteristically unfocused throughout the day — registering a question from Professor Sprout too late, lost in thought over lunch, and distracted during dinner.

But of all the things preoccupying his mind — his history with James and the lack of a future with him, Isa's place in his life and the role she was likely forced to play in the years to come, the fragile thread connecting him to the Muggle world and how Evans knew about it — one thought stood above the rest.

His brother.

Sirius.

He didn't hate him. He couldn't, even if he tried.

But he did envy him. Envy him with every pore in his body.

He envied that Sirius had been the one meant for this role — the heir. Intelligent, sharp-tongued, talented, charismatic, a natural leader — the one people gravitated toward. The one who could have carried their family name effortlessly, who could have worn its expectations like second skin.

And he had turned his back on them. All of the efforts, all the attention, all the years Mother had poured into him, and he had forsaken it, had dropped it, had turned his back on it all.

And now Regulus had to do it, had to take on the burden, had to play the part he was never meant for. Sure — he was handsome too, and he was intelligent too, but he hated the spotlight, hated being the centre of attention that so evidently wasn't supposed to be his. And though he was growing into it — becoming a man, taking on the roles he had to with surprising grace, learning to command the space around him — it would never feel completely right, and it would never be something he wanted, either.

And Sirius, Sirius had been both literally and figuratively born for it. Had been prepared for it from the moment he took his first breath, leaving Regulus in the background, forgotten. In the hands of someone whom they all trusted, whom Regulus trusted, but had betrayed him in every way possible.

Had taken his innocence, had taken his childhood and was still taking his life in some sense now. Had left him with a loneliness so profound that it had hollowed him out. Had left him watching the world from behind glass for years. Had scarred him for life.

And throughout the years, he would sometimes ask himself, but only in the deepest hour of the night, when he was stripped bare of all humanity — why him, and not his brother?

And then he would instantly hate himself for it. He'd loathed himself more for just having that thought once, than for all the revolting things he had let happen to himself for years on end.

Why did Regulus have to bear both burdens — both that of the heirship and that of the governor?

And Sirius — Sirius hadn't been able to deal with it.

Had both suddenly understood so many things he'd questioned before,

yet had also been unable to understand so much more when it all came to light.

Hadn't been able to say what he had to say, to do what he had to do. Hadn't been able to protect Regulus from the next onslaught against his soul when they had found out, when Bellatrix had sunk her claws into his mind. Hadn't been able to protect his little brother.

And although Regulus tried to reason with himself, tried to remind himself that Sirius had barely been more than a child still himself at that time, it still stung — surely the only thing Sirius had had to do, to stand up for him at that time, would be easier than enduring the years of torture that Regulus had?

No, the only one — out of Father, Mother, any of the adults — who had remotely known what to do, what to say, who had tried to protect him, had been Cissy.

"You alright, Reg?"

Isa's voice yanked him back to reality.

He nodded, taking a bite of chicken from his plate. "Yeah, sure."

Surprisingly, Isa hadn't seen anything behind Regulus's absence the entire Sunday, believing his lie of having studied in the library. There was always an edge of caution with her, though — Regulus knew that she was always keeping a close eye on him, always assessing, so, as always, he had to be especially cautious with her.

He knew it came from a good place, that Isa was genuinely worried about him — and with good reason, too. If their roles had been reversed, if he had witnessed with her what she had witnessed with him over the years, he would worry too.

Still, she had learned. Learned that pressing too hard only pushed him further away. So she covered it — the concern, the worry — hiding them behind subtle glances, carefully worded questions, small efforts to cheer him up.

Now, since Isa didn't know about Regulus's rendezvous with James the day before, he couldn't share anything about the ensemble they'd soon find themselves with. Instead, he kept up the pretense — unbothered, casual — as he made their way to the Potions classroom with Isa and Amaryllis.

The room was already occupied when they stepped inside.

Slughorn stood at the front, beaming as if this were a joyous reunion and was not, in fact, going to be the epitome of discomfort and pain.

His large belly bounced slightly with the movement as he clapped his hands together.

“Ah! There’s my brightest stars! Miss Nott, Miss Greengrass, and of course, young Mr. Black!” His eyes twinkled as he turned to Regulus. “Always a pleasure, my boy.”

Evans was already seated, offering them a polite but slightly stiff nod. He couldn’t really blame her — a Mudblood sitting alone in a classroom where now three of the most powerful traditional pureblood families stepped inside – a Black, a Greengrass and a Nott…

Slughorn had apparently changed the room’s setup especially for this class; instead of the usual tables for four with two cauldrons, there was only one large, oval table with six chairs in the centre of the room, with a single cauldron placed in the middle.

Regulus faltered for half a second — not only did he have to share a class with this group, but he had to share a bloody table with them, too.

No escape. No buffer. Just one, big, happy gathering of people he would rather die than see sitting together.

Isa took a seat next to Evans, then Regulus, then Amaryllis.

Regulus’s hands felt damp against the fabric of his robes. He barely registered the conversation unfolding beside him — Evans and Isa knew each other from the ASS-programme, where they’d shared a group, and Isa was now serving as a bridge between her and Amaryllis.

Regulus was too preoccupied with the classroom’s door to listen to their conversation, least of all contribute, his ears pricked only to sounds coming from the dungeon corridors.

And then he heard them — James and Sirius.

Their voices carried down the hall, drawing closer, and Regulus’s pulse thundered in his ears. He forced himself to inhale — deep, steady — before exhaling just as they entered.

The air shifted immediately.

James walked in first, wincing slightly, gaze flickering briefly over the group before he gave a small, awkward nod and took the seat next to Evans. He pointedly didn't look Regulus's way — for which Regulus was very grateful.

Sirius followed.

For a moment — too long, really — he just… stood there. Staring at Regulus like he'd walked into a trap.

"… *Oh.*"

Isa stiffened beside him. Her wide eyes darted between the brothers, then to James, then back again. She exhaled fiercely.

"Oh," she breathed, barely audibly. "That's uncomfortable."

The words went unnoticed by the rest who were all focused on the two brothers looking at each other.

Sirius finally inclined his head, his voice dry. "Regulus."

Regulus mirrored the gesture. "Sirius."

An impressively pressing quiet settled over the table as the rest of them watched the interaction, the discomfort from everyone palpable in the air.

Then, without another word, Sirius sat down.

Slughorn, either oblivious to the suffocating awkwardness or deliberately choosing to ignore it, flicked his wand, closing the door behind them. He clapped his hands together, positively beaming.

"Wonderful! *Wonderful!* So good to have you all here. A small but promising group, if I do say so myself." His mustache twitched as he scanned the table with pride. "Now, we'll be meeting every Monday, and I do hope you're all excited! We'll be delving into some of the *finest* potioneering — challenging, yes, but I've no doubt you'll rise to the occasion!"

Isa turned her head slightly, voice low with quiet horror. "This is it? This is the class?"

Regulus inhaled deeply, forcing his focus on Slughorn instead of his

brother… or the person who had, not even two nights ago, taken him from behind in the shower.

Regulus swallowed thickly.

“Apparently.”

Isa gave a slow, assessing glance around the table, then leaned in again, voice even flatter. “Oh,” she breathed. “That’s… *unfortunate*.”

Regulus barely held back a groan, nodding.

Slughorn, meanwhile, carried on, utterly in his element. “Now, potion-making, my dear students, is *not* a solitary art! No, no, no! A true potioneer must learn the value of teamwork — of collaboration! That is precisely why you are all seated together. You will be working as a group, sharing a cauldron, and learning from each other.”

Regulus had already braced himself when he saw the cauldron, but the confirmation still felt like a slap in the face.

Slughorn smiled, entirely unbothered by the tension suffocating the table. “And what better way to begin than with the Draught of Peace?” He chuckled, clearly amused by his own ironic choice. “A most appropriate selection, don’t you think? Let’s see if we can brew some tranquility, hm?”

With a flick of his wand, neat, looping instructions appeared on the blackboard behind him. He gestured toward them. “You’ll be brewing it together, just the one cauldron, and then we’ll assess whether there’s room for improvement — perhaps altering certain ingredients or refining the process. Potioneering is as much about innovation as it is precision, after all.”

Evans looked positively thrilled by this, her eyes scanning the instructions with the eagerness dripping from her eyes. Amaryllis, too, seemed rather cheerful, though compared to everyone else at the table, there wasn’t a high bar. The rest of them remained… *stationary*. Silent. Paralysed by the sheer tragedy of it all.

Slughorn glanced between them with mild surprise, as if only just now registering that something might be off.

“Well, go on then! Get the ingredients. I’ll be back shortly to check on your progress.”

And with that, he swept out of the room, leaving behind the worst possible combination of students in absolute, unbearable silence.

James cleared his throat. “Alright, let’s… get the ingredients, shall we?”

At once, chairs scraped against the stone floor, the sound deafening in the otherwise dead room.

Regulus found himself locking eyes with Sirius, both pausing a second too long before they gave the stiffest, most synchronised nods in existence and immediately looked away.

God — to go from living under the same roof to this…

Regulus made his way to the shelves at the far end of the room, choosing to collect the lavender and hellebore — the ingredients that would keep him furthest from where James and Sirius stood, who were, by the looks of it, gathering valerian root extract and moonstone. He kept his movements slow and although his hands were steady, he was painfully aware of the faint heat in his palms, the prickling sensation of sweat beginning to gather.

How was he going to survive this?

Back at the table, Sirius had, predictably, moved past the initial awkwardness as if it had never existed. He leaned back in his chair, all easy confidence, while Evans poured fresh spring water into the cauldron and adjusted the flame to medium-low.

Sirius turned his attention to Amaryllis, lips quirking as he said, “Greengrass, it’s been far too long.”

Amaryllis smirked, setting down the powdered moonstone. “Has it?”

“Yes,” Sirius sighed with a flair of drama, “the last time we’ve been so close must have been… the last Annual Ball at my cousin’s I had the honour of attending.”

Regulus briefly glanced up to the table, to the sight of James — the discomfort in his body clear as he was hyper-focused on measuring out exactly six drops of valerian root extract into the cauldron.

James accidentally met Regulus’s gaze as he set down the hellebore. It was only a fleeting moment before they looked away, but it was enough to exchange a shared, unspoken recognition of the painful

absurdity of this situation, and the big, pressing question — how the *hell* had they ended up here?

Isa, on the other hand, was clearly watching everyone like a hawk, both visibly afraid of how this catastrophe might unfold and utterly engrossed, absorbing every detail as if it were the most gripping drama she'd ever witnessed.

Amaryllis snorted. "You didn't really consider it an honour back then, if I recall," she pointed out.

"True," Sirius admitted. "But I recall we shared a dance or two, didn't we? I remember you stepping on my foot with considerable force. Some might call that a declaration of affection."

Isa groaned loudly. "Can you two please stop flirting and just add the moonstone? I'll stir."

Sirius did as he was told but with a wide, challenging smirk. "Ah, c'mon. Greengrass and I always liked each other. She's one of the only ones that could actually laugh at these things."

Isa shot back dryly, "I guess your sense of humour has something to do with that."

James and Regulus exchanged a fleeting glance, both internally grimacing.

This was getting painful.

Sirius, ever oblivious, continued, "Ah, don't be sour, Nott. I liked you too. But well, you and Reg were always attached at the hip, weren't you? With your supposed 'non-existent' relationship."

Oh — this was getting *very* painful.

Now, Regulus had already been avoiding James's gaze as much as possible, but the sheer dedication with which he now looked the other way was unrivalled.

Isa, however, was unfazed and just rolled her eyes, while Evans watched the whole exchange with an expression that was a very strange mix of amusement and confusion — probably gauging whether this awkward situation reflected the social mores of purebloods.

Unfortunately, Sirius wasn't done quite yet.

He turned to Regulus with a wicked grin.

"A non-existent relationship which has now been… consummated, if I am to believe the rumours."

Regulus felt his heart sink into his stomach.

No.

Sure, Regulus had a tendency to end up in strange situations — killing Professors or child molesters, driving cars with Mudbloods or being busted with his male lover by his best friend. But this — *Sirius* discussing sex between Regulus and Isa, in the presence of the former's secret lover, who just happened to be Sirius's best friend…

Oh, it was *actually* painful.

Well, better to rip the bandage off in one go, then.

Both James and Isa were both visibly stiff now — James looked at Isa with something close to disdain, while Isa looked a strange mix of forced indifference and painful regret, and Regulus was just… trying to grasp what the bloody hell was happening.

Sirius, for once, seemed to sense something.

He tilted his head. "Which is… a sensitive thing, apparently? Ah well, let's turn to you then, Greengrass — you do have poor taste in men, I've come to know."

Amaryllis didn't miss a beat. "Better than yours, Black."

Sirius scoffed. "Well, you and Crouch…" He pulled a face. "How in Merlin's name did that happen?"

Amaryllis, unfazed, arched a brow. "How about you and Macdonald, Black? Getting it on in a cupboard?"

Sirius grinned, the pride evident. "Yes, well, I might need to learn a thing or two from people."

Then, far too casually, he cast a very deliberate glance at James.

Regulus immediately saw James's eyes go wide.

A familiar sense of pure dread crawled up his spine.

No, no — what did he mean by that?

Amaryllis noticed too. “Ah, Potter, you dating anyone then?” she asked lightly.

Regulus didn’t miss Isa’s sharp inhale, which she quickly covered by *very aggressively* adding the hellebore to the cauldron.

Across the table, James scratched the back of his head, avoiding both Isa’s and Regulus’s gazes like his life depended on it.

“No,” James said, far too stiffly.

Sirius snorted. “He says he’s not, but he was definitely with someone after the party this weekend.”

Regulus practically felt his soul leave his body.

Amaryllis, entirely unfazed, said, “Oh, you guys had a party too on Saturday?”

Sirius nodded. “Yes, and guess who didn’t make it back to his dorm at night—”

No. Wrong. *Wrong*.

No ripping the bandage off in one go.

Abort mission, *now*.

Isa slowly turned to Regulus, the realisation visibly dawning in her eyes. She arched her brow, utterly unimpressed.

Regulus only managed to toss her an awkward, deeply guilty wince before throwing his quill to the ground — he truly needed a reason to physically get away from this conversation.

He felt his neck burn, pointedly *not* looking at either James or Isa as he deliberately stretched his quest for the quill on the floor.

“Oh, shut up about it already,” James snapped. “I wasn’t with anyone —”

Sirius, completely forgetting the rest of the room, retorted, “Oh, but this isn’t the first strange thing, you know that—”

Evans, who had been entirely uninvolved until this moment, suddenly perked up and said, far too cheerfully:

“Oh yes — you mean the love letters that Remus and Peter were discussing?”

The effect was immediate.

James froze.

Isa froze.

Regulus froze — a very unfortunate feature, given that he was still halfway to the floor, allegedly looking for his quill.

Amaryllis and Sirius, however, burst into laughter.

Evans, completely unaware of the catastrophe she had just unleashed, blinked at everyone in confusion.

Amaryllis, grinning like the devil himself, leaned forward. “Ah, so did the love letters give anything away?”

Regulus slowly straightened back up, very much regretting his life choices.

Sirius, shaking his head in absolute delight, reached out and ruffled James’s hair.

James looked like he wanted to die on the spot.

“Nah,” Sirius said, still laughing. “Only something about black curls, so yes — not a lot to go on.”

Regulus winced.

Oh, for *Merlin’s sake*.

He rubbed his temples in utter exasperation, doing everything in his power not to look anyone in the eye, suddenly very invested in the board instructions instead.

Isa, being the only competent person in the room, clearly took the mentioning of James writing love letters to Regulus as her cue to pivot.

“So — which step are we now?”

“The last one, actually,” Evans said. “Just need to add five drops of essence of lavender.”

“I’ll handle the jobberknoll feather,” Amaryllis nodded, crushing while Isa added the lavender.

Regulus had no eye whatsoever for the potion they’d been brewing, and instead could only wonder what fresh hell this disaster of a conversation would bring next.

Evans, clearing her throat, hesitated. “I know it doesn’t say in the instructions, but if we stabilise it with unicorn horn powder, the potion would turn out way better…”

Regulus jumped to his feet immediately.

“I’ll get it,” he blurted out, tone far too eager. “How much do we need?”

Evans, visibly startled by his sudden, frantic enthusiasm, blinked. “Just a pinch?”

“Perhaps we need some extra vials too,” Amaryllis nodded.

“On it!” James yelled, practically leaping from his chair to follow Regulus to the back of the room.

The rest of the group — thankfully — turned their attention back to the cauldron.

Regulus let his eyes quickly scan the cupboard’s contents, fingers ghosting over the labels, when James slid in beside him.

Then, in a whisper—

“You wrote me love letters?”

James blushed. “Oh, bite me,” he hissed, casting a quick, paranoid glance to make sure no one was looking. “This was *ages* ago.”

Just the idea of the handsome, popular Gryffindor Captain writing love letters to Regulus, the Slytherin Captain — it was both utterly absurd and surprisingly sweet.

Regulus, absolutely delighted, turned his head slightly, biting his lip to stifle the smirk threatening to form.

“You still got them, Potter?” he asked, voice far too casual.

James shot him a glare and muttered, “Sod off, Reg.”

Regulus snorted.

Then, realising that engaging in any form of banter with James Potter at this moment was a terrible idea, he quickly grabbed the unicorn horn powder and rejoined the group at the table.

The potion had to simmer for ten minutes — ten entire minutes — presenting a dangerous window of opportunity for Sirius to bring up even more sensitive topics, but thankfully, and against all odds, the remainder of the potions class went relatively smoothly — though, after the utter shitshow they had just endured, that bar was practically underground.

Unsurprisingly, it was mostly Amaryllis and Sirius who filled the silence in the classroom with casual conversation. Isa managed some superficial conversation with Evans, and Regulus and James were mostly silent until Slughorn returned, applauding them all excessively for the sheer magnificence of their potion, before he dove headfirst into the theoretical part of the lesson.

Now — Regulus knew, had just painfully witnessed that Slughorn had the tact of Bludger to the face, and still, he thought that setting the two Black brothers, the one partially held accountable for the schism between them — Potter — and a Mudblood at one table would be enough questionable decision-making for a day.

But then, Slughorn proved he had still some more tactlessness to display.

As the class wrapped up and everyone began to gather their things — no one had left yet, unfortunately — Slughorn turned to Regulus with a deeply sympathetic expression.

“Oh, and dear boy,” he said far too loudly, “I was so terribly sorry to hear about your mother’s illness.”

Regulus froze.

His fingers clenched around the strap of his bag, and in the corner of his vision, he *felt* several heads snap toward him in immediate interest.

Sirius, of course, who now heard his mother was ill, James and Isa, who were probably equally surprised that Regulus hadn't mentioned a word of this to them, Amaryllis, who was always interested in everything and everyone, and Evans, who just watched this entire evening unfold like someone had suddenly flipped to the wrong page of the script.

Regulus very carefully scratched the back of his head, keeping his expression as neutral as possible.

"Thank you, Professor," he said, voice perfectly even.

Slughorn, still completely oblivious to the presence of all the others in the room, let alone the *other* son of the woman he was talking about, continued, "Yes, yes, I've been in contact with your dear cousin Narcissa, and as we've agreed, you'll always have access to the fireplace in my office to visit your mother in these… particularly difficult times."

Regulus swallowed hard.

He, surprisingly, managed to keep a straight face.

"Thank you, Professor."

He saw this as his cue to leave and quickly fled the classroom.

The rest of the group began trickling out of the room too. Regulus had just made it into the corridor when Sirius's voice cut through the air behind him.

"What's wrong with her?"

Regulus stopped in his tracks.

He felt the eyes on him — Isa's, James's, Sirius's…

"Oh, now you care, Sirius?" he spat, surprised by the sharpness of his own words.

Sirius flinched as if he'd just been physically punched in the face.

Regulus turned away before he could see anything more, shifting his attention to Isa.

'You coming to the library?' he asked, keeping his tone carefully even.

Isa — who had wisely picked up the *do-not-engage* energy radiation from him, immediately nodded.

“Yeah.”

And just like that, the two of them walked away, leaving Sirius behind.

They walked in silence for the first minutes, until Isa spoke.

“…Your mum is ill?”

Regulus swallowed.

Lying to Isa — his best friend — about something like this felt deeply wrong, but he had no other option.

“Yeah.”

Isa hesitated, then asked, “What — what’s wrong with her?”

Regulus exhaled slowly.

“You know… just… strange symptoms – strange illness. It comes and goes.” He glanced at her. “They think it’s… psychosomatic.” A pause. “You know. After Sirius left.”

Isa absorbed that for a long moment.

Then, finally, she nodded.

“That’s…” she hesitated, then said softly, “I’m sorry, Reg.”

Regulus nodded once.

Isa clearly understood that he didn’t want to talk about it, because she didn’t push further, and instead, the two of them walked in silence.

But then, suddenly, Isa stilled.

And sure enough, when he turned, she was already giving him one of her signature, deeply unimpressed glares.

Regulus knew immediately what was happening and bared his teeth in an awkward grimace.

“So — spent a lot of time *studying in the library* on Sunday, Reg?”

Regulus sighed in awkward resignation. “Yeah — not that much … studying, I guess.”

Isa rolled her eyes but didn’t elaborate, although he *felt* the judgement radiating off her. He couldn’t blame her — it had been risky, stupid, imprudent, completely crossing the lines, after all. Regulus pointedly pushed down the knowledge that Isa had been forced to pay a heavy prize, too, for his relationship with James. He swallowed, trying to smother the violent surge of shame at the reality that he was wasting her sacrifice.

“What would happen?” Isa asked, all of a sudden, her tone curious. “What would happen if your brother found out?”

Regulus snorted. “There’s many scenarios, but none of them are good.”

Isa tilted her head. “Why, though? Is it… because it’s *him and you* … or because it’s…” She shifted on her feet, clearly uncomfortable, “...two blokes?”

Regulus, feeling the discomfort, too, turned his gaze to the meaningless wall while they walked.

“No,” he said after a beat, clearing his throat. “I don’t think Sirius would care about… that.” He swallowed. “Uncle Alphard was… you know. And Sirius always thought very highly of him.”

He could feel Isa watching him, but *very* eager to brush past the topic of sexuality — his or anyone else’s — he added quickly, “But I don’t think he’d understand *us*, though.”

Isa’s gaze turned questioning.

Regulus sighed. He realised, then, that he had never actually spoken about James with her. She had seen enough of it, both in his memories and in real life, but there was a difference between witnessing something and hearing it put into words.

And after everything she had done for him — the sacrifice she’d been willing to make for him — it was the least he could do, actually.

“It just… happened,” he admitted, ignoring the discomfort clawing at his throat and forcing himself to hold her gaze. “I… didn’t know. That I could fancy…” He exhaled sharply, pushing the words out, “blokes… until… I… you know, fancied him.”

God, this was even more uncomfortable than that entire horrendous potion class.

Isa must have sensed how painfully awkward this was for him because she gave him a small, encouraging smile.

“Are you?” she asked after a moment, her voice gentle. She glanced around, making sure the corridor was still empty before lowering her voice. “Are you, you know—” she hesitated, then, barely above a whisper, “—gay?”

Regulus stopped walking.

He looked at her — really looked at her. Into her deep, kind, curious eyes.

He thought about the night he’d spent with her, and how he — although he’d never have initiated it, would never have *thought* about the possibility — had thoroughly enjoyed every single second of sleeping with her.

“I think I like both.”

A small blush crept up Isa’s cheeks, and Regulus knew she was thinking about that night too. He averted his gaze and resumed walking, giving her space to compose herself.

“But no,” Regulus continued, equally eager to brush past *this* topic, too, “I think… he wouldn’t be able to grasp it. You know — his best friend, practically his brother, the only son to *such* parents… with *me* and well… *our* parents…”

Isa nodded understandingly.

“How does that work, though?” she asked, her voice quieter now. “You’re so… idealistic, Reg. How do you just… ignore his ideas? His views?”

Regulus gave her a wry smile. “I don’t ignore them. I understand where they come from — he was raised with his beliefs, just like I was raised with mine. The only difference is that his are fed by misinformation.”

Isa arched an eyebrow, unconvinced.

“We never really… discuss these things,” Regulus acknowledged, “but

well — there's these small things that give away that they think traditionalism is just about hating Muggles, hating Mudbloods and all — but it's not about that."

Isa gave him a look encouraging him to continue.

"Minchum and Jenkins before him, have spent years propagating that traditionalists only hate all these 'marginalised groups' just to discredit traditionalism in its entirety, you know. But traditionalism raises valid concerns about modernism. Keeping the magical and Muggle world separate benefits everyone — no risk of extinction for us, no dangerous ideas forced into either world. But instead of acknowledging why we believe that, they just reduce it to 'traditionalists hate Muggles' and call it a day."

Isa was quiet for a moment. Then, carefully, she said, "But there *is* a lot of prejudice when it comes to Muggles and Muggle-borns."

Regulus nodded. "Yes. But when you refuse to listen to concerns — when you immediately dismiss people as bigots instead of having an actual conversation — that's when resentment grows. When people feel unheard, that's when hate takes root."

Isa nudged him playfully. "Look at you — so wise and philosophical."

Regulus rolled his eyes. "It's really not that complicated, Ies."

He rubbed his face in an attempt to keep himself awake as they'd almost reached the library.

God, he was knackered. Although sleeping next to James for a night had provided some relief, the nightmares had returned with full force the night after, and with the stress that this evening had brought, he truly felt dead on his feet.

Isa clearly sensed this, too.

She grabbed his arm with both his hands carefully, forcing him to still and look at her.

"How are you… otherwise, Reg?"

Regulus sighed, really not liking the direction where this was going.

"Fine, Ies," he said, unable to completely hide the exasperation in his voice.

Isa raised an eyebrow. “How’re you sleeping these days?”

Regulus gave her a wry smile but decided not to lie. “Not too well.”

Isa’s expression darkened slightly. “Do you need—”

“Look, Ies.” Regulus cut her off. “It’ll pass. It always does — I’ve been here before, haven’t I? At some point, it’ll pass.”

Isa looked utterly unconvinced but clearly sensed she had reached the limit of what Regulus was willing to talk about tonight, because after a pause, she nodded.

“…Just,” she said, softer now, “you know I’d help, right? If you asked?”

Something warm and uncomfortable twisted in Regulus’s chest.

“I know, Ies.”

Chapter End Notes

Do I feel for Reg? Yes.
Do I just love writing scenes like this? Ab-so-lute-ly.

Chapter 7: Of Cottages & Goddesses

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Regulus's second week at Hogwarts was as eventful as the first one and, likewise, topped off with a particular eventful weekend — although now for entirely different reasons.

It all started with a letter.

Regulus didn't receive much post besides the Daily Prophet, and nearly every personal letter he did get came from Cissy. She had made it a habit to check on him regularly by owl, especially at the start of the school year. So, seeing her owl winging toward him on Wednesday morning was hardly unusual. And yet — call it instinct, call it sixth sense — Regulus knew instantly that this wasn't idle chatter.

While his friends were caught up in a conversation about the new scandal of Mr Filch busting two seventh-year Ravenclaws in a very compromising composition in an empty classroom, Regulus unrolled the parchment and read.

Dear Reggie,

I hope you've been doing alright. I miss you! I hope you're settling in well with classes and Captaincy.
It's only been a little over a week, I know, but I wanted to write to you about your mother. She's been unwell these past few days, and I think it would be best if you came home for the weekend. Friday would be ideal. I'll take care of the arrangements with Professor Slughorn — you'll find it easiest to head to his office after dinner and Floo directly to Grimmauld Place. Everything will be prepared.
Take care of yourself, darling. I'll see you soon.

Your all-time favourite,

Cissy

He swallowed.

So it had begun.

*****

Regulus spent most of the time until Friday evening wondering what the weekend had in store for him. Surely, he was going to do 'field work' — but that could mean anything; it could be surveillance — at the same warehouse even — or it could be something completely different.

And Cissy had said he was to come home for the weekend — did that mean he would be gone the entire time?

Dread and thrill filled him with equal fervor.

Last time had been… unexpected. Unexpected in the way that working with Rodolphus and Yaxley had been surprisingly tolerable. Unexpected in the way a simple, routine surveillance mission had spiralled into a fight against four intruders. Unexpected in the way he had watched four people drop dead to the ground.

Unexpected in the way he had felt nothing.

Still felt nothing.

Would it be the same this time?

Would he look death in the eye again? Would he be the one to kill, this time? Or would he freeze, again?

And would he feel as numb as he had the last time?

Or would he feel it, now — feel it like he'd felt with Thorne and with Demir?

The thoughts ran in endless loops, filling nearly every waking moment, and yet, the week passed quicker than expected. He had swapped Quidditch practice with the Ravenclaws, pushing Slytherin's usual weekend training to an extra session on Wednesday. And between classes, essays and their regular Thursday practice, it was dinner time on Friday in no time.

Regulus sat with the usual six at the table, Isa and Evan on either side, Barty and Avery across from him.

They were discussing their weekend plans, but Regulus didn't pay a lot of attention, instead hyper focused on getting some food in his system. He wasn't thirsty, nor hungry, even though he felt like he hadn't eaten properly for days.

A smirk curled at Barty's lips. "What do you think, Black? The classroom or the dorm?"

Regulus blinked, barely registering that he was being pulled into the conversation. "What?"

Evan rolled his eyes. "Should we gather in the classroom or the dorm?"

Regulus hesitated. "Err—"

Barty snorted. "Black, looking forward to a party as ever."

Regulus let out a mirthless breath, already bracing himself for what was coming. "Yeah," he sighed, shifting uncomfortably. "I… won't be here this weekend."

As expected, his friends' attention snapped to him immediately. Evan and Barty exchanged glances, as if silently checking whether they had somehow missed something, and Isa looked at him with a set of discerningly piercing eyes that Regulus very.

"I'm going home," Regulus added, keeping his focus on the green beans speared on his fork. "My mum's ill."

Isa's expression softened in an instant, sympathy flashing across her face. Evan and Barty, however, still looked perplexed.

"You never told us she was ill," Evan said, frowning. "What's… up?"

Regulus nodded absently. "They don't really know. It comes and goes. But she's had a rough week."

He still didn't look at Barty.

Something about lying about this — while Barty's mother was actually ill — didn't sit well with him. And the fact that he had a direct Floo connection home from Slughorn's office, while Mr. Crouch — Head of Law Enforcement — hadn't even bothered to arrange the same for his own son…

Well, that must have been a bitter pill for Barty to swallow.

"When will you be back?" Isa asked quietly.

Regulus shrugged. "Before classes on Monday at the latest."

*****

Regulus spent less than thirty minutes at Grimmauld Place.

Only thirty minutes — but they were so utterly twisted that it felt like hours.

They had told him that Mother was to pretend to be ill to the outside world so Regulus would always have a convenient excuse to leave Hogwarts — to have a way to join the Revolutionaries while he was still at school; one foot in Hogwarts, his domain, his sphere of influence and one foot outside, on the battlefield, where covert missions were taking place.

It was perfect — Mother had kept to herself ever since Sirius had broken with the family, only appearing at essential public events, so it was the perfect lie, the perfect excuse. It was simple — to the outside world, she would be unwell, but within their closed circles, life could continue as usual.

At least, that was what Regulus had thought.

But now that he was here, standing in her dimly lit bedroom, he realised that it was not that simple at all.

Her usually sharp features were drawn and pale, dark circles smudged beneath her eyes. Her cheekbones jutted out as she had clearly lost weight — too much weight.

Regulus had seen her barely two weeks ago — and then she had been fine. And now, it was as if he were looking at a different person completely.

His stomach clenched. He tore his gaze away from Mother, sleeping deeply, and snapped his head toward Cissy in complete shock.

Cissy met his eyes instantly.

“It’s temporary,” she said, her voice reassuring, gentle. “She’ll have her medicine in a few days.”

Regulus didn’t move. His skin crawled with a slow, creeping realisation.

This was *on purpose*.

His breath caught. He stared at Cissy in complete, utter shock.

“This—” His voice came out hoarse. “This was *done* to her?”

Cissy exhaled, giving a small nod, showing she knew how awful it sounded. “We needed a waterproof lie,” she explained. “Something beyond suspicion. It had to be real — on record.”

Regulus shook his head, utterly bewildered. “You—” He looked between her and Mother’s frail form. “This is sick.”

Cissy looked compassionate, wry. “She wanted this, Reg. You know how dedicated she is to the Cause.”

He let out a sharp, disbelieving breath. “No — this… this is… next level. What if she doesn’t get better?”

“She will,” Cissy assured him, gently stroking his curls. “We have the antidote. We just need to wait a little longer — until St. Mungo’s has enough records of her ‘condition’ to make it convincing.”

Regulus dragged a hand down his face. “This is too much,” he said. “Why — why so paranoia? Who is going to check on her?”

Cissy’s lips pressed together. “No one’s asked questions yet. But as the war intensifies, they might, Reg. And if they do, we can’t afford any loose ends.”

Regulus slightly shook his head.

Cissy took a step closer, lowering her voice. “Reg, your mother is doing this for the Cause. But more than that — she’s doing it for *you*.”

Regulus swallowed, his throat tight.

“For the Cause,” she continued, “because we cannot risk losing our most valuable source at Hogwarts. And for you, so that you have a reason to leave, so you have the chance to be part of this as fully as you can, to rise in the ranks, to matter even more than you already do.”

He turned back to Mother.

She looked smaller than he had ever seen her — weak, fragile. Her breathing was shallow. God, she looked even worse than she had after her ‘episode’ when Sirius had left.

Mother. So regal, so indomitable — reduced to this.

For the Cause. For Him.

He sighed.

Fuck.

*****

As Regulus couldn't wait to leave Grimmauld Place — and more specifically, Mother and Cissy — he was relieved that Yaxley showed up quickly and made him side-Apparate along to… well, he actually had no bloody clue where to.

He smelled it even before he opened his eyes — lavender. The scent of Isa. Subtle but unmistakable in the air which felt… cleaner, crispier than the air of London. It was warmer, too, but an evening chill clung to the breeze. The sky was streaked in deep blues and purples, twilight bleeding into the horizon.

They had landed in front of a large, worn-down warehouse — slightly similar to the one from his first field mission. The building was dark and closed and Regulus quickly concluded they wouldn't be stationed inside. Instead, his attention shifted to the small stone house nearby, half-concealed by creeping vines and wild shrubbery. It looked like a caretaker's cottage, a dirt path winding between the two buildings before disappearing into the rolling stretch of vineyards that sprawled into the distance.

His gaze flickered over the landscape again, something clicking into place.

"We're in Provence," he said.

Yaxley shot him a surprised look. "Bloody sharp you are, Black."

The front door of the cottage creaked open, and out stepped Lucius, Rodolphus, Dolohov, and Mr. Nott, all greeting him with claps on the back or, in Mr. Nott's case, a charming half-embrace.

Regulus turned his head, scanning the surroundings again. That was when he saw it — a large house in the distance, practically a castle.

His stomach twisted slightly as recognition settled over him.

"The Legot estate," he said, more certain this time.

Lucius smiled approvingly. "Very good."

Dolohov and Rodolphus exchanged an impressed glance before Lucius gestured toward the cottage and invited Regulus inside.

The space was surprisingly cosy. The small living room held a stone fireplace, its embers still faintly glowing. A small kitchen was tucked into the corner, but the most important part of the room was undoubtedly the large wooden table, cluttered with surveillance devices, scattered chairs, half-drunk glasses of firewhisky, cigars, and playing cards. It reminded him oddly of the former warehouse he had surveilled.

Lucius took a seat, gesturing for Regulus to do the same. “There are two bedrooms upstairs,” he explained. “One for the day-shifters, one for the night-shifters.”

Regulus arched a brow. “So we’re surveilling again?”

Lucius inclined his head. “Yes. Simple observation for now, though this particular warehouse might be trickier than your last assignment. Corban will fill you in later, but if anything seems off, there’s an immediate call for backup.”

Regulus nodded, absorbing the information. “Alright,” he said, glancing around at the group. “So what am I, day or night?”

Yaxley clapped an arm around his shoulders, smirking. “Oh, we’re night-shifters, you, Rodolphus, and I.”

Dolohov, already half-sitting on the armrest of a chair, nodded. “Rabastan, Lucius, and I took the day shift. I’ll be going to sleep soon and Rabastan was dead on his feet — passed out already.” He let out an amused snort.

Regulus took it all in eagerly, looking around at the space, the people. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but there was something infectious about the setting. He’d never thought it possible, but he had come to realise that the people he found himself with now were actually quite tolerable. Rabastan and Dolohov had changed completely since his fallout in Black Manor all that time ago and he’d had quite a pleasant time with Yaxley and Rodolphus last time — well, at least before they were ambushed and had to kill four people.

“I can show you the sleeping quarters,” Yaxley interrupted his thoughts, “so you can get an hour or two in before we start.”

But Regulus shook his head before he even considered it — he was too

alert, too excited. He doubted even a Sleeping Draught would be able to knock him out right now.

“Nah,” he said. “I’m fine.”

Yaxley’s grin widened. “Knew you’d say that. Come on, then — I’ll show you around.”

*****

Not much later, Regulus found himself at the table with Yaxley and Rodolphus, talking and playing magic poker. Rabastan and Dolohov were asleep upstairs and Lucius had left to get a few hours of rest at Malfoy Manor.

“Why don’t people just sleep at home?” Regulus asked, studying his deck of cards. “France hasn’t imposed wards against international Apparition yet — so they could just Apparate home, right?”

Rodolphus nodded. “Yeah. This was a setup that Lucius and, well, you know… Thorne—” he briefly averted his gaze “—came up with. There’s immediate backup if necessary and it fosters camaraderie between us Revolutionaries.”

Yaxley snorted. “Oh, sure. Seeing each other snore and watching how we eat our eggs in the morning really forges unbreakable bonds.” Then, his voice turned more genuine. “But it actually works. If we want to fight together, we have to know each other — each other’s strengths — so we can work more instinctively.”

“Makes sense,” Regulus said, nodding as he took a sip of Butterbeer. He cast a quick glance at the surveillance devices scattered across the table — none showed any suspicious movement outside.

“Too bad you can only join us occasionally, though, Black,” Yaxley said, leaning back in his chair and stretching lazily.

Rodolphus nodded, absentmindedly levitating scraps of parchment into the air. “Yeah. Too often would raise suspicions.”

Regulus looked at them both. They were in their mid-twenties, strong, talented — the way they leaned back in their chairs, so at ease, so completely in their element. They were exactly where they were supposed to be.

And then there was him — still with two years of Hogwarts ahead of

him, still not even a man, really.

Before he could stop himself, the words slipped out. “Why do you care so much?”

Yaxley and Rodolphus shot him equally surprised looks.

“I mean,” Regulus continued, shifting uncomfortably, “there are plenty of better duellists. And it’s a hassle, with me at Hogwarts and all.”

His thoughts flickered to the lengths they had gone to just to give him a viable excuse to leave the castle. The frail, sickly figure of his mother…

His stomach churned.

Yaxley and Rodolphus exchanged a glance — cautious, calculating.

“Now you’re selling yourself short, Black,” Yaxley said at last, his voice tinged with something between confusion and disbelief. “You duel like a professional — bloody impressive, considering your age.”

Regulus ignored the sudden flicker of pride in his chest, masking it with mild irritation at having his age underscored again.

“Besides,” Rodolphus added, visibly searching for the right words, “you’re kind of a bridge, aren’t you? Between us and the new wave of Revolutionaries. Someone needs to be able to show them, teach them.”

Regulus frowned. “But surely you could teach them better than me?”

Yaxley swirled the Firewhisky in his glass, staring into it as he spoke. “That’d be the ideal situation, yeah.”

A silence stretched between them as realization crept over Regulus.

“You’re… counting on not being there to teach them.”

Yaxley let out a low snort. “Never wrong to bet on different dragons, Black.”

Rodolphus met Regulus’s gaze, clearly deciding that his appalled expression was the moment to soften the blow. “Look — we don’t know where we’ll be a year from now, let alone two. Right now, we’re winning because the Ministry refuses to even acknowledge there’s a

war. That gives us the advantage."

He leaned forward, his tone turning more serious. "But that's going to change at some point. And when it does… who knows what's going to happen?"

Regulus swallowed.

Yes, it was war — and in war, people died.

God, he had *seen* people die.

He had *killed* people.

And yet, *him* dying — it always felt as something unreal, distant, unlikely.

A tense, reality-checking silence followed which was, mercifully, broken by Yaxley.

"Who would you find willing to join, from Hogwarts?" Yaxley asked.

"Well, there's Evan, of course — Rosier. And Barty… Crouch. Then there's Avery and Mulciber, and another bloke — you probably haven't heard of him — Snape."

Rodolphus nodded. "That's a solid list."

"Yeah — and they're passionate about it, too. Practicing spells, jinxes, dueling, all of it."

Unbidden, his mind flipped to his friends. He had left Hogwarts only hours ago, yet it felt as if days had stretched in between — like he had stepped into another dimension, another world, stretching the distance unreasonably long.

They'd probably been in the empty classroom the entire night — or, as they'd come to call it, the duelling classroom. Barty, Evan, Mulciber, Avery, Severus… Isa.

"How about girls?" Regulus asked suddenly. "Do they — get to join?"

His eyes flickered toward Rodolphus, whose wife was the only woman he knew of who actually fought alongside them.

A loud, amused chuckle from Yaxley pulled his attention away.

“Her father won’t have it, Black,” Yaxley smirked, clearly having pieced together whom Regulus was talking about. “Besides — better to keep the women out of it.”

Rodolphus nodded solemnly before taking a sip of his Firewhisky. “Yeah. They’re a distraction. One minute you’re knee-deep in a mission, the next you’re knickers-down with a woman and surrounded by modernists pointing their wands at you.”

Regulus snorted, unable to suppress the thought that if someone couldn’t keep it in their trousers for a single evening on a mission like this, then perhaps that was an effective way of weeding out the weak ones.

Yaxley leaned back, tilting his head at him. “So — how’s Hogwarts then, Black?”

Rodolphus smirked. “How’d you do on your O.W.L.s?”

Regulus shrugged. “I did fine.”

Yaxley snorted. “Ah, your cousin told me you did more than just fine. Ten Outstandings, if I recall.”

Rodolphus let out a low whistle. “So you’re fit and you’ve got brains — Nott must be thrilled.”

Regulus was well aware, though, that both the competition for intelligence and the competition for looks was easily won by Isa.

With a smirk, he raised his glass. “She got eleven.”

Rodolphus frowned. “O.W.L.s?”

Regulus didn’t break his gaze away. “Outstandings.”

Yaxley cursed under his breath. “Fuck.”

Regulus felt a swell of satisfaction at the realisation that Isa — always reduced to her beauty — easily outsmarted every single person in this room.

*****

Just a weekend at the Legot estate made Regulus realise that Lucius and Thorne had been right about the value of spending time with fellow Revolutionaries. Nothing particularly exciting had happened

the first night — the three of them had sat around the table, talking about whatever crossed their minds, devouring snacks, and, later, in a desperate attempt to stay awake, engaging in impromptu duels outside.

As was apparently tradition, they had made eggs just before their shifts ended, waking the day-shifters with their choice of breakfast before finally crashing into bed themselves. Though completely knackered, Regulus had cast a Silencing Charm just to be sure and had been out until dinner, when — also per tradition — the day-shifters returned the favour by waking them with a meal.

The atmosphere was oddly enjoyable; banter flew across the table, crude jokes about waking up with a hard-on were met with laughter and the act of sitting together, eating, and swapping stories made the whole thing feel strangely brotherly.

Like the warehouse from his first mission, the massive structure beside the cottage stored vital supplies — mostly for Healing potions. Legot had ensured tight security; under pressure — or more likely, Regulus realised with a bitter taste in his mouth, under torture — Legot had given them the location, binding them as safekeepers under the Fidelius Charm. But even with that safeguard, the supplies couldn't be moved; they could only be harvested and processed on-site, and they were still working on ways to bypass that security. Until then, their job was to keep watch.

It was trickier than the last mission. This time, no one knew who else might have access to the location. They were far more likely to receive visitors — unlike at the previous warehouse, where, ironically, they had already been ambushed by four.

And yet, Regulus didn't feel the risk.

No, he was having a rather good time.

He had found a way to blend in. Yes, he would always be the outsider — the youngest, the least experienced in all departments — but at least he was challenged. He could duel with people far more experienced than himself, talk to those who had witnessed things beyond the walls of Hogwarts. And he was so, so far away — both physically and mentally — from the one person who had made his way into his heart, taken root there, and whom he couldn't quite turn his back on yet, no matter how inevitable, undeniable and unstoppable it was.

God no, it felt good — it felt good to be the person who he had to be. To be where he had to be. To do what he had to do. No second-guessing, no nuances, endless loops of buts and ifs. Just doing.

Like the first, the second night passed uneventfully — just the three of them at the table, making their way through an alarming amount of enchanted snacks, Yaxley regaling them with tales of girls from Hogwarts, Rodolphus sharing Ministry gossip. And later, when fatigue began to settle in, they fell into their routine — taking turns running laps, doing push-ups, casting jinxes at one another just to stay fit and alert.

By Sunday morning, when they'd woken the day-shifters with poached, scrambled and cooked eggs — chosen, respectively, by Regulus, Yaxley and Rodolphus — and Regulus climbed into bed, already healing Rodolphus snore in the bed across the room and Yaxley saying goodnight with his easy smirk, Regulus had to conclude that he had not minded spending the weekend there at all. And after a couple of hours of sleep, he'd be returning to Grimmauld Place, then to Hogwarts, and this odd, surreal weekend would come to a close peacefully and quietly.

That is, until all hell broke loose.

*****

Regulus knew it instantly — the low, urgent shouts, the scrape of chairs against wooden floors.

Something was wrong.

His body moved before his mind caught up. He shoved off the blankets, feet hitting the cold floorboards, adrenaline slicing through the haze of sleep. He didn't even think of putting on a shirt — his wand was already in his grip.

"Up," he snapped urgently, shaking Rodolphus and Yaxley awake. "Now."

Yaxley groaned but sat up immediately, instincts overriding exhaustion. Rodolphus, blinking hard, opened his mouth to demand an explanation, but Yaxley cut him off.

“No idea what's happening, but get reinforcements. Just in case.”

Rodolphus nodded, reached for his wand and Disappeared on the spot

with a sharp crack.

Now with shoes on, Regulus and Yaxley sprinted downstairs where they nearly collided with Dolohov, breathless and battle-ready, a smear of dirt on his cheek.

“There’s at least six,” Dolohov reported, voice clipped. “Lucius took out two. Rabastan got one. Three more left. But something’s fucking with the devices — can't get precise locations.”

Yaxley turned to Regulus, a question in his eyes.

Regulus didn't hesitate. There was no rationality, no sensibility left as adrenaline and — let’s be frank — sleep deprivation, made the decisions now.

Nothing more than this existed — the wand in his hand, the alarmed eyes of his fellow Revolutionaries, the urgency washing over him.

“Where do you want me?” he said.

Yaxley’s expression hardened with approval. “Stay here. They’ll try to enter the cottage. Wait for them. Backup won’t be long — they’ll arrive anytime now.”

Yaxley paused at the door. He turned back, his face deadly serious.

“And Black — don’t think twice. They’re here to kill us. Don’t get killed.” He inclined his head. “Kill first.”

Regulus’s throat was dry as he nodded.

He slipped outside, pressing himself against the thick vine bushes that climbed the stone wall of the cottage. The leaves were rough against his bare back, and though it was mid-September, the French sun was still fierce, making sweat bead along his spine. His heart pounded, pulse thrumming in his ears.

Then — movement.

Boots crunching against the dry earth.

Fuck. If they rounded the corner, they’d see him.

Don’t think twice. Kill first.

His grip on his wand tightened. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

Then—

Unparalleled relief washed over him when those rounding the corner turned out not to be intruders, but reinforcements instead — Mr. Nott, Mr. Carrow, Bellatrix and Mr. Rosier stepped out of the cottage. The latter three immediately spread out over the estate — wands ready, eyes scanning the surroundings, while Mr. Nott was apparently set on taking Regulus under his wing.

He joined him beside the vine bushes, his sharp eyes flicking to the vast stretch of land between the cottage and the castle.

"Any details?" he asked, voice low, taut with readiness.

"Ambush — no idea how many. Devices are being tampered with," Regulus reported. His voice was steadier than he expected.

Mr. Nott nodded once. “Let’s move together. Synchronise.”

Regulus nodded. “Yes, let’s.”

Mr. Nott stilled for a moment, his sharp gaze trailing over Regulus — assessing. His pupils were blown wide with adrenaline, wand gripped tight in his hand.

“Look — I can say I ordered you to leave,” he said evenly. “If you Apparate now.”

Regulus blinked.

It took a second for the meaning to sink in.

Mr. Nott was offering him an escape. A way out.

He could leave, he could be safe.

The thought made something burn inside him — something sharp and ugly.

So that’s what Mr. Nott thought of him. That he couldn’t handle it. That he wasn’t strong enough. That he belonged in the safe halls of Hogwarts rather than here, in battle, fighting alongside them.

He found it oddly condescending. Insulting, even.

The fact that the offer came from him — the ever charming, incredibly powerful Magnus Alaric Nott, undoubtedly to be his father-in-law

some day — only made it worse.

No. *No*.

Regulus lifted his chin. “I’m fine where I am.”

Mr. Nott studied him for a long moment before nodding firmly.

“We hold position. They’ll get to the cottage sooner or later. They’ll want information.”

They pressed themselves against the thick vine bushes, bodies tense, ears straining for movement. Apart from the warm breeze rustling the leaves, an eerie, tense silence stretched.

Then — footsteps.

Not from one side — from multiple sides.

Regulus’s stomach clenched as he realised—

They were surrounded.

Two intruders from behind the cottage and two more approaching from the front.

Before he could react, Mr. Nott flicked his wand — a sharp, precise movement, effortless. A flash of lethal green light and the first intruder hit the ground with a dull *thud* .

Regulus barely had time to process it before movement behind the cottage stole his attention.

Two middle-aged men in dark robes, wands drawn were speaking in rapid French.

“You take the young one — he’ll only need one hit.”

“I’ll go with Étienne for the old one.”

Regulus’s breath turned shallow. His hands trembled fiercely.

Time stood still and flew by instantly all at once — in reality, it was only a split second, but it felt like hours as Regulus let all the realities pass through his mind.

He was going to get killed. It was going to happen. The left one was to

go after him.

Fuck.

He thought of Mother — frail and sick, all in sacrifice for him. For him to be here, to fight. It could not be in vain. It couldn't be for nothing.

He thought of the last time, when he had frozen in battle. He thought of the shame of it, the disappointment, the self-loathing that he hadn't been able to take care of himself. That *Rodolphus* — Bellatrix's husband — had had to save him. That he had someone like him to thank for his bloody life.

He thought of Hogwarts. He thought of his friends in the empty classroom, duelling, laughing over dinner, waiting for him to return.

He thought of Isa — her howling laughter, the warmth of her hands as they danced.

Oh God — he was not done hearing her laugh. Not yet.

And, just for a second, a split second, he thought of James.

Of his mischievous smirk. The way his lips had brushed against Regulus's earlobe in the dark. The warmth of his arms around him.

Fuck. *Fuck it.*

There was too much to live for.

He was not dying today.

Before anything could move — could *think*, even — Regulus's wand was up.

A silent flash of green light erupted.

The first man crumpled, dead before he hit the ground.

Fierce determination mastered Regulus completely, heat spreading through his body, and before he could make sense of anything, he turned his wand on the second man.

Another silent spell, and another body hit the dirt.

Somewhere in the background, Mr. Nott cursed — locked in a furious duel with the last intruder. Curses flew back and forth, the afternoon

haze lit up by the colours of their hexes flying above, past, through.

Regulus pivoted sharply, heart hammering, his wand rising.

It was merely a movement, but it was enough for their opponent to be distracted only for a split second.

A flick of Mr. Nott's wrist and a green burst of light followed.

The man was dead on the floor before he realised his mistake.

Both of them were out of breath. Mr. Nott leaned heavily against the wall, chest rising and falling in deep, measured inhales. Regulus exhaled sharply, rubbing a trembling hand over his face, feeling the sweat cooling on his skin. His wand was still clenched too tightly in his grip, his fingers stiff, his palm damp.

Mr. Nott's gaze drifted to the bodies sprawled at their feet — lifeless, still — then back to Regulus. Something flashed across his face — something unreadable, calculating — before he spoke.

"You alright?"

Regulus swallowed hard. His throat was still dry, but he forced a nod.

"Brilliant."

Mr. Nott let out a slow breath, shaking his head. "I wonder how many there are — this is already four—"

"There were already three out before you arrived," Regulus cut in.

Mr. Nott cursed under his breath. "Bloody clever, too. Attacking in broad daylight — when you least expect it."

Regulus frowned, still panting. "What's their goal? What do they want?"

A dark chuckle rumbled from Mr. Nott's throat. "Well, apart from killing as many of us as they can? They'll try to get to the warehouse. They probably know how to relocate the supplies inside—"

Regulus straightened. "Then we'd better go."

Mr. Nott nodded. "Let's move."

They were right — by the time they arrived at the building of the

warehouse, it was already chaos.

Shouting erupted from every side, voices overlapping in a mess of panicked English and rapid-fire French.

Regulus moved to one side, heart hammering, his shoulder aching from the strange, twisting motion he had made to kill the second man.

— *to kill the second man.*

He had just killed two people.

Fuck.

His stomach twisted violently, nausea creeping up his throat.

But there was no time to dwell on it — because a shout snapped him out of his thoughts.

His eyes locked onto two figures, yards away, moving swiftly through the chaos.

He froze.

Women.

They were *women*.

One of them said something in French, low and urgent.

"Check whether they understand French — it'll be easier to fool them if they don't."

They darted away, slipping between the shadows of the warehouse walls. One of them suddenly shouted—

"Hey, you fools! Look behind you!"

As expected, none of the British wizards reacted. The other woman looked determined, resolute, as she nodded in silent understanding.

Regulus barely had time to process it. His pulse was still too erratic, adrenaline surging through his veins, numbing rational thought. Everything was a blur of movement and noise, his brain sluggish, still catching up to the reality of it all.

At least until one of the women barked a command in French—

"On commence."

Let's start.

The shift was instant.

From every shadow, behind every tree, the remaining intruders emerged, gathering in the open field beyond the warehouse. They fanned out, wands raised, drawing everyone's unwavering attention.

Regulus's stomach twisted.

Something was wrong.

It was too coordinated — too sudden.

And yet, like clockwork, the others reacted. Mr. Carrow, Mr. Rosier, and Bellatrix charged into the fray, wands flashing, curses splitting the air. Mr. Nott took a step forward, preparing to join them.

Regulus's heart pounded. He swept his gaze over the scene — really looked this time. Counted.

Shit.

They were *badly* outnumbered.

His instincts screamed at him. His body was already moving before he had even fully grasped what was clawing at the edges of his mind.

"Did you hear them?" he asked urgently, stepping toward Mr. Nott.

Mr. Nott's eyes were still fixed on the battle. "What?"

Regulus wet his lips. His hands were clammy. His thoughts were racing.

"I think—" He hesitated, then forced the words out. "I think it's a diversion. They're pulling us in on purpose."

Mr. Nott's gaze flicked to him then — just for a second, sharp with consideration — before scanning the field again. His face remained unreadable, but his posture changed, his wand gripped tighter.

Regulus pushed on. "I think they want us to fight here. That they're herding us."

Mr. Nott didn't respond immediately. His eyes swept the battlefield with renewed. Bellatrix — laughing, sharp and wild, as she fought two witches at once, deflecting a hex with a flick of her wrist before retaliating. Mr. Carrow — blood seeping into the fabric of his sleeve, but not slowing, snarling as he cast another brutal curse. Lucius — barely dodging a hex, shielding himself just in time before snapping his wand up to counter.

Then he saw it.

A shimmer in the air — subtle at first, nearly invisible in the heat of battle, but unmistakable now that he was looking for it. A thinly veiled wall in the middle of the field, undulating with faint waves of colour, like oil on water. Under different circumstances it might have been awe-inspiring, but now it was nothing short of alarming.

Even more alarming was the fact that it seemed to go completely past everyone fighting in the field, too immersed in the battle.

"What *is* that?" Regulus shouted, panicked.

"If I'm right," Mr. Nott said grimly, eyeing the wall too. "It's a transportation portal — step through it, and you're taken somewhere else."

A location no one would want to be found, probably — at least not alive.

Mr. Nott nodded once, sharp and decisive. "I'll Apparate there — warn them, drive them back. You stay here. Hold the line."

Regulus nodded.

Without another word, Mr. Nott Disapparated with a *crack,* appearing in the middle of the chaos in the field. The moment his feet hit the ground, he raised his wand, a shimmering shield bursting into place around him. His voice cut through the battle, commanding, urgent—

"*Fall back! Get back to the warehouse!* "

Regulus exhaled sharply. No time to think, no time to hesitate. He sprinted forward, heading toward Rodolphus, who was locked in a vicious duel.

Then—

A deafening blast.

A force unlike anything he had ever felt struck him, raw and violent, sending him hurtling into the air. His stomach lurched — his body weightless for a single, terrifying second — before the world spun.

And then, before he could make sense of anything, could process what was happening—

All went black.

*****

The first thing he registered was a merciless, violent pounding in his head.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

The second was the rushing in his ears, like waves crashing on the shore.

Hhhsshhh.

And then came the hammering in his chest as the memories slammed back into him all at once.

Thump-thump-thump-thump.

Regulus's eyes snapped open.

Panic clawed up his throat as he registered his surroundings, which were oddly contrasting with the urgency rushing through him — the dim light, the low murmur of voices, the weight of a warm blanket over his waist pushing him down.

The cottage.

The intruders.

The warehouse.

The portal.

His body tensed, his instincts screaming at him to move.

"Ah, there he is."

Regulus turned his head sharply.

Cissy.

Her smile was utterly relieved, though her blue eyes were watery.

Regulus groaned at the idea of Cissy crying over his knocked-out body.

His eyes scanned the rest of the room. Lucius — leaning against the fireplace, looking exhausted but contemplative and calm. Yaxley — sprawled in an armchair, smirking. Mr. Nott — sitting near the window, a nasty cut slashed across his cheek, idly swirling a drink in his hand.

Regulus pushed himself up, ignoring the sharp pull at his abdomen. “What the hell happened?” His gaze flicked to each of them in turn. “Where is everyone? Did we win?”

Yaxley smirked. “Easy, Black. Don’t want you passing out again.”

Heat curled in Regulus’s stomach — shame, irritation. To be lying like this, in front of all these people, in the middle of the living room. He shuddered.

The sensation made him realise that he was still shirtless, white gauze wrapped around his lower abdomen.

“Yeah, that was an ugly blow,” Mr. Nott remarked, nodding at the bandages. “And you hit glass, too.”

Regulus exhaled sharply. “Where *is* everyone?”

Cissy reached out, brushing his curls back from his forehead. He recoiled instinctively, sitting up straighter.

He already looked like a bloody child — having Cissy coddle him in front of them was really too much.

Lucius, of course, noticed and suppressed a smirk.

“Everyone’s alive,” he answered. “Rodolphus got hit by a particularly nasty hex and Carrow might need a few days to fully recover, but aside from that, we’re all fine.”

Yaxley let out a low whistle. “Bloody miracle, considering how many of them there were.”

Mr. Nott handed Regulus a glass, the rich scent of alcohol curling into his nostrils. He hesitated, then took it anyway, downing a sip as Mr. Nott continued, “We do have that advantage over the French, though. They’re widely known for their lacking dueling skills.” He smiled, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “Too much time spent on poetry and art.”

Yaxley snorted.

Regulus’s grip tightened around the glass. “We killed them all?”

Lucius shook his head. “We took out a significant number, but once they realised we weren’t falling for their trap, many Apparated away.”

Mr. Nott leaned back against the wall, lifting his glass in a lazy salute. “And we have *you* to thank for that, Regulus.”

Yaxley sighed contentedly, sinking further into his chair. “Fucking saved our arses again, Black.”

Regulus frowned. “I didn’t do anything, though. They literally shouted their plan out loud. Bit stupid of them to assume no one here speaks French.”

There was a beat of silence.

Regulus glanced around. “Wait. Don’t you all speak French?”

Yaxley: “Nope.”

Lucius: “Yes, but I’m a bit rusty.”

Regulus shrugged it off.

“What now? Are they coming back?”

Lucius shook his head. “We don’t think so. They suffered a tremendous loss. Bellatrix is collecting the bodies.”

Something raw and fierce twisted inside Regulus at those words.

Cissy sighed, smoothing her skirt. “Let’s get you home, though. It’s been enough. We just wanted to make sure you woke up before we left.”

Regulus nodded, swinging his legs over the side of the sofa. The dizziness hit him instantly, but he pushed through it, reaching for the

shirt folded on the table and pulling it over his head.

Cissy stepped closer. “You can Side-Ap—”

“No,” Regulus cut her off. “I can Apparate.”

He downed the rest of the drink, ignoring the burn in his throat and the shudder down his spine.

Yaxley winked. “Until the next one, Black.”

Regulus shot him a flat look before turning to Mr. Nott. They shared a glance before Regulus turned on his heel and Apparated.

*****

Naturally, Cissy had pressed Regulus to stay another night — either at Grimmauld Place or at Malfoy Manor.

Regulus couldn’t get to Hogwarts soon enough, though.

He couldn’t stay any minute longer in the same house as Mother — sick, fragile, so unlike herself, bedridden.

He didn’t fancy staying at Cissy’s either — the thought of anyone knowing he had to be babysat at Malfoy Manor made his stomach turn.

And he didn’t want to stay at Black Manor either. It still hadn’t caught up with him — the weekend, the fighting, the bodies… but he knew it would eventually, and he had an inkling he’d better not be alone when it did.

So, after reluctantly agreeing to dinner with Cissy, he found himself walking the dimly lit corridors of the dungeons, making his way toward the common room.

And — unsurprisingly — it hit him all at once then.

He couldn’t make sense of anything. All of it — his thoughts, his emotions, all of it was conflicting, fighting, battling just as fiercely as he had physically done only hours ago.

Until noon, he’d had a good weekend. He'd felt like he belonged — something which he’d never ever thought possible in the presence of Yaxley, Dolohov or the Lestranges. It actually sounded absurd.

But yes — he'd felt at ease, had enjoyed his time at the cottage, even.

And no, he hadn't wanted to leave when it all started. He felt foolish for it now, in hindsight, but yes — he'd wanted to prove himself. Show them that age was just a number. That he was just as skilled as they were.

It wasn't, though, and he wasn't, either.

No — he'd seen them fight. Bellatrix — wild and relentless like the psychopath she was and visibly *thrilled* by the challenge, but easily handling three people at once. Lucius — sharp and precise, every movement strategic and spot-on. Mr. Nott — one of the finest duelists Regulus had ever seen, barely breaking a sweat as he took on opponent after opponent.

No, Regulus didn't compare.

He was still alive because of pure luck and coincidence. He had been surrounded by good duellers, had been underestimated by his opponents and had been mostly at the sidelines when things got truly lethal.

The only reason he had made a difference at all was the bloody French he understood.

And that had been a coincidence.

Had they been in Portugal, he wouldn't have mattered.

And yet—

He had killed two people.

Regulus froze.

He had *killed* two people.

He hadn't frozen, hadn't second-guessed this time. Had done what he had had to do.

And he felt nothing. Bloody utterly nothing.

No relief that this time he'd been able to. That this time he'd done it. That this time, he had only himself to thank for his bloody life.

But also — no guilt, no dread. No disgust at the fact that he'd taken

two lives just hours ago.

He had killed two people.

And he felt empty, numb.

Well, no — that wasn't quite right. He didn't particularly feel anything when thinking about the fact he'd killed them.

But he *did* feel — he felt restless.

It coiled through his muscles, thrummed in his blood. He wasn't sure if it was the remnants of adrenaline, the shock, or the sleep deprivation, but his body wouldn't settle. He wanted to *run*. To *jump*. To *shout*. To *punch* something.

And he wanted to sleep so fucking badly. To turn his heart off. To shut up his brain. To rest his soul.

But he knew that the moment he'd hit that pillow, they'd be waiting. The demons, the memories.

They would be jumping on his agonising soul tonight.

He stepped into the common room and saw his friends were gathered in the usual corner.

Isa and Barty were laughing, Isa's head thrown back, Barty gesturing wildly as he told whatever ridiculous story had them in hysterics. Evan was on his feet, doing some idiotic dance move, nearly knocking over a chair. Mulciber and Avery barked in amusement, while Severus sat apart from them, a book open in his hands, completely absorbed.

Regulus forced himself forward, though he had no clue how to compose himself, how to school his face.

God, he had to sit down and make small talk about his sick mother — who had been made *intentionally* ill — after spending the weekend being ambushed, after killing two people.

How the hell did someone do that?

Truth be told, he did a remarkable job — but not a flawless one.

He leaned against the wall, greeting, nodding, forcing smiles when necessary. He spoke just enough, laughed at the right moments — but he didn't look at Isa, not once. And not for too long at Barty or Evan,

either.

Regulus didn't miss the concerned glances exchanged between them.

He couldn't blame them, either — he knew the circles under his eyes hadn't been this dark for months and he knew that the exhaustion, the stress, was etched into his face.

So, when he excused himself to get a shower he wasn't taking and get some sleep he wasn't getting, it didn't surprise him that Isa followed him into the otherwise empty dorm.

He busied himself immediately, rummaging through his wardrobe, pretending to look for something — anything — to do with his hands. Isa stepped inside quietly, closing the door behind her. He spared her a quick glance before returning to his task, already preparing some excuse, some easy reassurance to feed her.

But Isa cut him short.

"Put on your pyjamas."

Regulus froze. His head snapped toward her, confused. "What?"

Her expression didn't waver. "Do it."

He hesitated, debating whether or not to argue. But then he caught the look in her eyes — firm, resolute, unyielding — and sighed, knowing it was a lost battle.

Wordlessly, he peeled off his shirt, half-turning so she wouldn't see too much. Isa, to her credit, glanced away. He pulled on a loose, long-sleeved top and a pair of pyjama trousers, then spread his arms dramatically, showing the result.

Isa gave him only a short smile. Then she stepped closer.

Her deep brown eyes, grave and searching, made him feel like she was peeling him open, stripping him bare of all pretenses. It made him feel like he stood there, in front of her, completely naked.

Before he could react, she lifted his shirt.

Regulus flinched, averting his gaze as she inhaled sharply.

The bruises were ugly. Dark splotches bloomed across his ribs and abdomen, stark against his pale skin. It was a good thing that the

nasty cut from earlier had at least been taken care of with Cissy's wand.

Isa's gaze lingered, sharp, challenging. She knew.

"You got these at your parents'?"

Regulus opened his mouth.

Isa stared at him. Again, Regulus felt stripped bare under it, like she could see through every wall he had ever constructed.

Her tone was firm but not unkind. "Either tell the truth, or don't tell me anything at all. But don't lie — and don't, for a second, think I'm daft enough to believe your lies."

Regulus swallowed.

Silence stretched between them, thick and weighted. And in that silence, his answer was clear.

He didn't want to tell. But he wouldn't lie, either.

So he kept silent as he felt the emotions surge through him.

Something sharp lodged itself in his throat. His fingers trembled slightly against his own skin.

Isa's expression softened, her brows drawing together. Her voice was concerned and gentle. "Are you in pain?"

Regulus shook his head.

Isa swallowed, then — without another word — reached for her robes and pulled them off.

Regulus froze.

She stood in front of him, clad in nothing but her underdress. Regulus's eyes dragged over her before he could stop himself. The fabric was light, almost sheer in the light of the dormitory. The way it clung to the curve of her waist, the swell of her hips, how it dipped dangerously low at her neckline—

Regulus swallowed. Then blinked. "What are you doing, Nott?"

Isa arched a brow. "You are going to sleep. And since I'll be sitting

with you until you do, I'm not going to wear stiff robes."

He blinked. Then blinked again.

The thin material really left little to the imagination. Her full breasts strained against the neckline, the fabric fluttering slightly with her breathing.

Wearing *that* in a room where Barty, Evan, Crabbe and Selwyn could walk in at any moment—

A laugh burst from his lips, abrupt and unbidden.

Isa frowned, a mixture of concern and confusion flickering across her face.

Regulus shook his head. "Yeah, no. You won't be wearing that."

Without another word, he turned to his wardrobe, pulled out a pair of pyjama trousers and a T-shirt, and tossed them toward her.

Isa held up the pants, unimpressed. "You want me to wear something two sizes too big?"

"It's non-negotiable."

Isa sighed but didn't argue. She slipped the trousers on, then tugged the oversized shirt over her head.

Then, she motioned toward the bed. "Lie down."

Regulus hesitated, still not quite understanding what she intended to do.

And then—

He understood.

The moment he settled, Isa draped the curtains and, without a word, she slid her fingers into his hair.

Regulus exhaled.

Oh, *she was a goddess*.

The tension in his body unravelled, his mind going blissfully blank as Isa's fingertips scratched lightly against his scalp, threading through

his curls with slow movements. His head rested against her lap, her warmth steady beneath him, her familiar scent surrounding him.

This. *This* was exactly what he needed.

The only thing that could shut his mind off.

The only thing that could keep the demons at bay.

His breath evened out, his eyelids growing heavier, his body sinking further into the mattress.

At some point, when his breathing had softened and deepened, Isa shifted slightly, about to move—

But then—

In a deep, almost unconscious state, Regulus stirred, his arms instinctively wrapping around her waist, fingers curling against the fabric of her pyjama trousers. His voice, thick with sleep, was barely more than a murmur.

“Stay.”

Isa stilled.

She hesitated for a moment, as if considering whether she should.

But then she exhaled softly, her resolve melting, and carefully adjusted herself, aligning her body with his.

Their legs tangled.

His chest rose and fell against her back, his breath ghosting against her hair, the warmth of it rebounding softly onto his own skin. His fingers curled into the fabric of her borrowed shirt, his hold loose but firm enough to keep her there.

Isa remained still, listening to the way his breathing grew deeper, steadier, his body gradually losing its tension as sleep pulled him under.

And with her warmth against him, her scent threading through his sheets, he drifted into a deep, dreamless slumber.

Far away from his demons — both in this world and the next.

Chapter End Notes

Aah... next chapter, Potions class again ;)

Chapter 8: Of Jealousy & Bathrooms

Chapter Notes

> A long chapter before the weekend (it could make two chapters but I didn't feel like breaking it up).

❤

Regulus woke up groggily, blinking against the dim light filtering through the dorm. His mind was sluggish, his limbs heavy, warm. *Too* warm.

And then, he realised — it came slow, it crept upon him.

Isa.

She was curled up against him, the reason why it was so bloody warm.

His entire body went rigid.

A flash of memory, buried somewhere deep, surfaced — his own voice, thick with sleep, barely above a murmur. *Stay.*

Regulus swallowed hard, his brain scrambling for what the hell he was supposed to do now.

Sure, it wasn't the first time they'd shared a bed — back at Black Manor, she used to sleep next to him all the time. But that was a king-size bed, with Regulus claiming one outer half, and Isa — always sleeping on her right side, bum pushed backwards and hugging a pillow — on the other.

The situation in his single bed in the dorm was quite different.

Her hair was *everywhere* — a soft, tangled mess of gold spilling over his pillow, tickling his jaw, his neck. She was completely knocked out, mouth slightly open in all her uncharming glory, breathing slow and even.

Her aforementioned preferred sleeping position — on her right side, bum backwards — now meant that parts of her body were touching parts of his body in ways he really, *really* wished they weren't.

Very, *very* carefully, he moved to check the time, awkwardly twisting his wrist to see his watch. It was almost time to get up.

He inhaled sharply through his nose.

Right. Time to extract himself from this situation.

Moving at a painstakingly slow pace, he inched away from her warmth, only for her body to immediately shift backwards, chasing the lost contact.

Regulus clenched his jaw. Well, *fuck me*.

He tried again, this time making sure to pin her under the duvet instantly, tucking it over her securely. Once she was properly covered, he slid out of bed and made his way to the bathroom.

When he emerged from the shower, clothed in his underwear and his T-shirt to hide the bruises, the dorm was more awake. Crabbe and Selwyn were already gone — probably headed for breakfast — and Barty and Evan were still lazily lounging on their respective beds, their curtains drawn back.

Regulus knew that, the instant they'd find Isa in his bed, their minds would jump to all kinds of wild conclusions, of which he wouldn't hear the speculation ending for weeks, so he decided it'd be better to sneak her out.

He was very thankful that they'd finally reached a point in history where he wasn't met with suggestive glances every time he and Isa breathed in each other's direction — a much-needed improvement from the years he had to convince everyone twice a day that he was neither sleeping with Isa nor harbouring secret romantic feelings for her.

No, best not to ever go back to that.

The downside of this plan, however, was that Barty and Evan didn't prudently filter anything coming out of their mouths, not knowing that there was a girl in the dorm — and well, as was often the case, Barty started the day with a highly detailed, dramatic retelling of an escapade with Warrington — either in real life or in his dreams, Regulus didn't know, but the effect was all the same.

"Okay, but imagine you're like *really* turned on—"

Regulus froze.

With how loud they were speaking, Isa was definitely awake already, listening in on every word.

“Look, mate—” he started, voice warning.

Evan, grinning wickedly, cut him off. “Yeah, okay, so you’re *really* turned on.”

Regulus shook his head, gesturing for them to shut up.

Barty, blissfully ignoring him, carried on with dramatic flair. “And then she lowers your boxers with her teeth—”

“Oh, hell yeah,” Evan grinned.

No. Not hell yeah.

Hell to the bloody *no*.

“Look, Barty—”

“I swear, she did this thing with her tongue,” Barty continued, still hoarse with sleep but passionately committed to his story. “Like a bloody spell, mate, I thought I was about to meet my ancestors.”

Evan snorted. “You’re exaggerating.”

“I *am not*—”

Regulus groaned, rubbing his temple. “Please — can we *not* discuss this right now?”

Evan stretched lazily. “Why? Are we offending your delicate sensibilities?”

Barty shot him a suggestive grin. “Yeah, don’t be a hypocrite, Black. Don’t tell me you’ve never thought about Nott—”

Regulus’s eyes snapped wide in panic. “Shut up, Crouch.”

Evan and Barty howled with laughter.

“Nah, I think Black here’s the pleaser,” Evan mused, smirking.

And then, in unison, he and Barty mimicked Isa’s voice from that

time, mockingly breathless—

“Oh, *Reg*—”

Regulus felt the blood drain from his face.

Then—

Regulus’s bed curtains were yanked open violently.

Isa sat up, hair still an absolute wreck, blinking at them with unimpressed exasperation. “I think it’s *really* disturbing that you two haven’t let that go yet.”

Barty and Evan jerked back in shock, their faces frozen.

Regulus exhaled long and suffering, rubbing his hands down his face.

And then Barty and Evan erupted into uproarious laughter.

Evan leaned back smugly. “Oh, I *like* this.”

Barty smirked, eyeing Isa up and down in Regulus’s pyjamas. “Morning, Nott,” he drawled, voice dripping with suggestiveness.

Evan grinned. “Didn’t expect to see *you* here.”

Both of them turned to Regulus in dramatically slow fashion, throwing him a wicked glance.

Regulus rolled his eyes in exasperation.

Isa, equally unbothered, rolled her eyes too. “Didn’t expect to be woken with Crouch’s fairy tales about Warrington, but here we are.”

Barty shot her an indignant glare.

Evan sniggered.

Isa, seemingly unfazed, threw the duvet off and grabbed her robes, about to change right there and then.

Regulus whipped his head towards her, nodding firmly at the bathroom door.

Isa groaned. “Oh, for fuck’s sake. You and your damned chastity.”

She snatched up her clothes and stomped irritatedly to the bathroom,

slamming the door behind her.

The second it shut, Barty and Evan joined Regulus at eider side and threw an arm around him. All three of them looked at the door like it had just become the most fascinating thing in the world.

“So…” Evan drawled, amusement laced in every syllable. “Fun night, Black?”

Regulus snapped. “No. I know you won’t believe me, but I didn’t touch her with a finger.”

Barty smirked. “I still don’t know how that works with you two, though.”

Evan nodded. “Still — after spending the summer sharing a bed with Nott *ourselves*, I actually do believe you.”

Barty smirked. “Yeah. But mark my words, it happened once, and we can only dream that it’ll happen again.”

Barty and Evan sniggered loudly.

Regulus punched Barty in the arm. “Better go back to dreaming about Warrington before I hex you in your sleep, Crouch.”

*****

The rest of Monday was as chaotic as its start. It started in the Great Hall during breakfast, where the atmosphere was a stark contrast to the easy banter of the dorm.

Regulus felt it the moment he, Barty and Evan stepped inside — the usual hum of morning chatter was replaced by a strange mix of hushed whispers and heated discussions. Students huddled in groups, poring over copies of the *Daily Prophet*, their faces tense. Professors sat in clusters at the staff table, their voices low, their expressions grim. And more than a few wary eyes followed them as they strode past — the kings of Slytherin, the heart of traditionalism.

They reached their usual spot at the Slytherin table, where Avery, Mulciber and Severus were already seated. Across from them sat Melania and Amaryllis, deep in discussion, their faces serious.

“I bet it’s really them — really the Death Eaters,” Mulciber nodded.

“They’re saying it’s the worst in years,” Amaryllis added.

“More than years,” Melania cut in, shaking her head. “They’re calling it unprecedented.”

Avery scoffed. “The French are always calling things unprecedented, though.”

Barty pulled a face. “What the hell are you lot talking about?”

Before anyone could answer, a sleek brown owl swooped down toward Regulus, bringing him a tightly rolled copy of the Prophet. He swiftly slipped a few coins into its pouch before it took off again, leaving him to unroll the newspaper as he sank onto the bench.

His heart plummeted as he read the headline.

DARK MARK CASTS SHADOW OVER GRUESOME PROVENCE ATTACK
By Mathieu Laurent, International Correspondent

PROVENCE, FRANCE – One of the most brutal magical attacks in recent French history has left 21 dead at the remote estate of the late Potioneer Grandmaster Potioneer Armand Émile Legot, shocking both the French and British wizarding communities. The massacre, described by officials as ‘unprecedented in its savagery’, took place late last Sunday afternoon. The victims were discovered in a gruesome display — bodies stacked atop one another, and above them, the Dark Mark floating in the night sky.

French Aurors remain baffled as to the motive behind the attack, as Legot’s extensive potion warehouse — one of the few noteworthy assets on the estate — was left entirely untouched. “There is no clear evidence of theft, sabotage, or targeted assassination,” said Hugo Marat, a senior investigator for the French Ministry of Magic. “This was a deliberate massacre, but for what purpose, we do not yet know.”

The attack has already sparked a diplomatic row between France and the United Kingdom, with French Minister for Magic, Apolline Barbeau, stating that she has repeatedly warned British officials about suspicious activities possibly linked to British citizens operating within France. “We have sounded the alarm before, only to be dismissed time and again by Minister Minchum,” Barbeau declared in an urgent press briefing this morning. “Now, we have twenty-one bodies and the Dark Mark above them. Tell me, how much more evidence does Britain need?”

However, British Minister for Magic Harold Minchum has urged caution,

suggesting that the Dark Mark may have been left as a diversion rather than an actual sign of Death Eater involvement. "There is no conclusive proof that this was the work of Death Eaters," Minchum responded. "It would be irresponsible to assume anything without solid evidence."

With tensions mounting, the international community is demanding answers. Meanwhile, fear spreads across France, as the wizarding public wonders — if not the Death Eaters, then who?

Regulus could kick himself for not foreseeing this — of course news about the happenings in Provence had reached Britain, had reached Hogwarts. And of course the killing of twenty-one people wasn't something the Daily Prophet would just gloss over.

What he hadn't anticipated, however, was that it would take up the entire cover page, and the majority of the rest of the paper, too.

And what he hadn't seen coming — although he really should have, after years of this — was just how blatantly wrong the article was.

It painted a picture of twenty-one people being senselessly, brutally slaughtered, but that wasn't true — those twenty-one had initiated the attack, *they* had ambushed them, *they* had opened fire.

God, the article didn't even question why there had been twenty-one people gathered at Legot's estate to begin with.

They, the Revolutionaries, had been attacked by *them,* had been awfully outnumbered by *them* in a highly coordinated attack. And the article portrayed it as a senseless, random murder of twenty-one people — no mention at all of self-defence or the reasons why there had been a fight in the first place.

No, with the Prophet having spent years spoon-feeding its readers whatever narrative the Ministry saw fit, it shouldn't surprise Regulus — yet it somehow still did.

He did wonder, though — why it had been wrapped up the way it had. Regulus had left before everything had been… dealt with, so it was now that he learned that the Dark Mark had been cast, that the bodies had been stacked, and that apparently, the estate had been abandoned — without taking a single supply, even.

He had a more immediate problem than the Prophet and its faulty

news coverage, and it came in the form of a golden-haired girl with all-seeing brown eyes and a brain sharper than a slicing hex.

Regulus was so engrossed by the article that he didn't register her joining them at the table across from him. She too had noticed the tense atmosphere the moment she'd set foot inside the Hall and had very quickly plucked Evan's copy right from his hands.

Regulus forced himself to stay relaxed, flipping a page, spearing a sausage onto his fork with forced nonchalance. He knew she'd seen the bruises. She knew there was something fishy about him visiting his ill mother. Still, even she wouldn't make the leap from him not being at Hogwarts to Regulus being involved in a massacre in the south of France.

All he had to do was play it cool. Lay low.

Which, in hindsight, was possibly the stupidest thing he could have done.

Evan, sitting beside Isa, leaned forward, elbows on the table. His tone was casual, but his eyes gleamed with interest. "So. What do you reckon? Death Eaters or not?"

Barty made an amused sound through a mouthful of toast. "Oh, *surely* Regulus has some ideas. What's your theory, Black?"

Regulus went still.

Too still.

"I have no idea."

Isa's head snapped up.

Regulus felt it the moment he'd made the mistake. *Fuck*.

He had meant to sound dismissive, unbothered. Instead, he had sounded defensive, almost… panicked.

By insisting he didn't know anything he'd actually done the exact opposite. He *always* had something to say about the news, about the major happenings — a thought to share, some theory to throw in the mix.

Evan and Barty wouldn't clock it but Isa was sharper than most people, even on a bad day.

And now, he watched the realisation flicker across her face.

Her eyes widened slightly, flicking to his torso, where she'd seen the bruised the previous night. A second later, her fork slipped from her grip, clattering against her plate.

For a moment — just a brief, sharp moment — her gaze locked with his.

He swallowed.

Then he looked away, pointedly focusing on his food.

Barty, completely oblivious, raised an eyebrow. "What's up, Nott?"

Isa straightened, pulling her expression back under control. When she finally spoke, her voice was tight. "Nothing."

*****

Regulus managed to postpone being alone with Isa until after lunch — a near-impossible feat, considering she seemed determined to corner him.

He had struck up forced conversations with Barty, suddenly remembered forgetting books from the dorm, even disappeared to the bathroom for entirely too long. But after lunch, when Barty and Evan wandered off to the common room for their free period, Isa had won.

The moment they were alone on their way to the sixth-floor Runes classroom, she seized her chance.

Her voice was low but unnervingly sharp. "So. You were there. In Provence."

Regulus stiffened. He scanned the corridor quickly, instinctively checking for eavesdroppers. "We can't talk about this here," he muttered under his breath, looking away.

"Oh, *no*," Isa said, voice tight with determination. "You're *not* brushing me off. I want to know if my best friend was involved in a *mass murder* in bloody France."

Regulus groaned, seized her by the arm, and pulled her into an empty classroom, shutting the door with more force than necessary.

"It wasn't like that at all, Ies," he said immediately, voice low but

urgent. “That’s *not* what happened.”

Isa folded her arms, unimpressed. “Alright. So what *did* happen, then? They just dropped dead of their own accord?”

Regulus shot her a glare, jaw tightening. “They *attacked* us. We were ambushed. A coordinated, sly attack. It’s a bloody miracle we even won—”

Isa raised an eyebrow. “*Won*? You’re calling it *winning*? Twenty-one people dead and that’s your idea of a victory?”

Regulus clenched his jaw, his temper flaring.

Of course she’d say that — easy to sit on the sidelines and moralise, easy to talk about right and wrong when you weren’t there, when no one was trying to kill you.

“You haven’t got a clue, Ies,” he snapped. “We were *cornered*, surrounded. We weren’t meant to make it out alive — if it hadn’t been for your fath—”

He froze.

Isa froze.

A slow, horrible silence spread between them, thick and suffocating.

Isa’s expression shifted, the blood draining from her face. “My *father*?” Her voice was barely a whisper. “My *father* was there?”

Regulus felt sick. Sweat pricked at the back of his neck. He had said too much.

She wasn’t supposed to know. Wasn’t supposed to know any of it. And God forbid he dragged himself any further into whatever mess that revelation would create within the complex Nott dynamics.

Isa took a step forward, shock and fury in her eyes. “What are you *doing* there, Reg?” Her voice trembled. “You’re *sixteen*, for Merlin’s sake. Why are you fighting for your *life* in *France*? And why the hell is my father letting you?”

Regulus exhaled sharply. “To his credit, he *did* offer me to leave—”

“Oh, how *bloody gracious* of him,” Isa snapped, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Regulus flinched. Silence stretched between them, heavy with everything they weren't saying.

Finally, he exhaled, his voice quieter now. "Look, Ies, I'm not allowed to discuss this. With anyone." He met her gaze, his own eyes dark with warning. "And if the staff finds out, I'll be expelled."

Isa's eyes were suddenly brimming with tears. She blinked hard, trying to keep them at bay, but her voice trembled when she spoke. "I know, Reg. I know. Of course I won't tell anyone."

Her face crumpled, and before he could react, she stepped closer, wrapping her arms around him.

Regulus stiffened for half a second, then relaxed into it, his own arms winding around her, his hand settling at the back of her head. She was shaking — he could feel it. He closed his eyes and pressed his cheek lightly against her hair, inhaling the faint scent of lavender and ink.

Her voice was muffled against his chest. "This war… I feel like it's going to wreck us, Reg." She sniffed. "It's going to wreck everything."

Regulus swallowed against the lump in his throat. He pulled back just enough to cup her face, brushing his thumb gently over her cheek, wiping away a stray tear.

"Nothing a Nott and a Black can't weather," he murmured. "Especially if we're in it together."

Isa let out a weak, watery laugh, the sound fragile. Then, without hesitation, she hugged him again, tighter than she'd ever had.

*****

Another factor contributing heavily to the chaos of Monday was, of course, Potions class in the evening.

This time, Regulus was particularly dreading the prospect of people discussing the happenings in France — it had been all anyone talked about that day, from students to staff, so it seemed inevitable that it would come up during class, too.

Surprisingly, though, it didn't — it seemed that everyone was too preoccupied with maintaining the fragile truce between Slytherins and Gryffindors at the table, too wary of letting politics break the thin thread of civility, especially in that particularly uncomfortable setting

of Potions class.

That didn't mean it made for a pleasant class, though — no, it was an endless stream of sensory overload for Regulus, a steadily worsening, all-consuming storm of nonsense, culminating in one grand, pivoting disaster of a night.

He walked to the classroom alongside Isa and Amaryllis, barely registering Amaryllis chattering away about something. This time, all the Gryffindors were already there when they arrived.

"Ah! My Slytherins!" Slughorn beamed at them as they entered, clapping his hands together like he was welcoming old friends into his drawing room rather than students into a classroom.

Regulus took a seat at the damned oval table, let his eyes wander for just a second too long — and then immediately regretted it.

He locked eyes with James.

He *really* didn't get it. Couldn't grasp it — how, after all this time, it still sometimes felt like looking into James's eyes for the very first time. There was no logic to it. Some days, he could meet James's gaze and feel nothing but familiarity, recognition.

But then there were moments like this.

Moments where those warm brown eyes locked onto his, and he felt it — disarming, overwhelming, electrifying. It made him want to do so many things at once and yet nothing at all. Made him want to kiss him, whisper against his lips how James completely undid him, made him want to take off his clothes slowly, piece by piece, and show him in all ways how much he loved him.

But it also made him want to just sit there. To do nothing but look at him — to drown in his gaze and never come up for air.

Unfortunately, neither option was particularly viable, given the people in the room.

James's eyes were deep and kind, but also… concerned.

Of course. Regulus knew James would have noticed his absence over the weekend, would have worried. It was, frankly, a miracle he hadn't already been cornered and interrogated.

Regulus swallowed and tore his gaze away, hoping — *praying* — no one had noticed his reaction to the Gryffindor Captain.

He forced himself to focus on the board.

Slughorn clapped his hands together. “Right, my dears! Tonight, we’ll be brewing a rather *intriguing* potion — Amortentia!”

Regulus groaned.

Of course they were brewing a love potion. Of course they were brewing the one potion that would open up all kinds of doors for Amaryllis and Sirius to talk about *the* topic Regulus wanted to steer clear of more than anything.

Slughorn beamed, gesturing to the large, shimmering cauldron at the front of the room. “For you seventh-years, this will hardly be new, but I want to make sure everyone fully grasps the basics before we move on to potential ingredient improvisations — oh, there are so *many* fascinating variations! Off you go, gather your ingredients!”

As expected, Amaryllis and Sirius immediately made their way toward the cupboard, already lost in an animated conversation about something.

Regulus, meanwhile, sensed it instantly — James was in one of his prat-moods that he reserved specifically for Isa.

Isa surveyed the instructions.

“Alright. That’s doable,” she concluded in an encouraging tone.

James arched a single eyebrow, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Oh, yes. Would’ve been *tragic* if it had been hard for you.”

Isa’s lips parted slightly in bewilderment. She flicked a glance at Regulus, clearly uncomfortable, then answered James in the most diplomatic tone imaginable. “I mean, we managed the Draught of Peace last week, didn’t we? This isn’t nearly as complicated.”

James just gave her a flat, unimpressed look.

Isa turned back to Regulus, eyes full of questions Regulus did not have the answers to.

Before he could even think of intervening, Amaryllis and Evans began the potion, following the first steps — pouring fresh spring water into

the cauldron and setting it to heat, then carefully measuring out moondew extract before stirring it in, three times clockwise.

That was when Sirius cornered him.

“You were gone this weekend.”

It wasn’t a question.

Regulus tensed, instinctively aware of all the eyes on them. Sirius’s voice was low, a whisper, which in all honestly only added to the intrigue for the people around them.

He kept his expression carefully neutral. “I was.”

Sirius huffed a quiet breath through his nose. “Was it because of Mother?”

Regulus hesitated just a fraction too long. “Yeah.”

Sirius’s voice dropped lower. “She… okay?”

Regulus studied him for a moment. This was so typical. He’d claimed for years now that he hated her with every fibre of his being, but it took only small moments like these to show that, even though he undoubtedly tried hard, didn’t hate her at all.

It shouldn’t surprise Regulus, of course — with all the effort, time and strain Mother had poured into him, and with the two of them being so alike, it must have been hard for Sirius to truly, *really* hate her.

“Yeah,” Regulus murmured. “She’s okay again.”

A brief pause. Then—

“You okay?”

Regulus froze for a moment. It was only two words, but somehow, they landed somewhere deep in his chest, unexpected and oddly heavy. He had no idea what it was, or how to place the feeling, but it made him uncomfortable.

He swallowed, forcing himself to shake it off. Too many people were watching.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m okay. You?”

Sirius held his gaze for a second longer than necessary, then gave a short nod. “Yeah. Me too.”

They both nodded once more, then — without another word — turned back to their potion as though nothing had happened.

The tension that had briefly filled the space dissolved into the general classroom chatter again, more so when Sirius strolled lazily toward Slughorn’s desk, leaned against it with an exaggerated stretch, and smirked.

“You know, it’d be *hilarious* to nick some of this and feed it to a first-year.”

Evans, who had been dutifully stirring the potion, shot Sirius a withering look. “You do realise you’re saying this in a room with the Head Boy, Head Girl and a Prefect, right?”

Sirius barely blinked. “Yeah, but the Head Boy is really on *my* side, so he doesn’t count.”

James smirked. “That’s supposed to be a secret, Padfoot.”

“Oh, my apologies,” Sirius said in a tone that suggested zero actual remorse.

Amaryllis, watching the shimmering potion swirl in the cauldron, looked thoughtful. “Hang on. If a first-year drank *our* potion right now, who’d they fall for? I mean, six of us are brewing it.”

Evans frowned. “I think it’s the person who gives it to them, not the ones who made it.”

Sirius waved a hand. “Ah, we don’t need any of this rubbish, do we? Greengrass, you seeing anyone?”

Amaryllis shook her head. “Not at the moment.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “Still with Macdonald?”

“Yes.”

She rolled her eyes, though in an amused sort of way.

As Regulus had expected, the conversation drifted from there to dating and relationships, him doing everything in his power to go unnoticed and not become part of the conversation in any way.

Unfortunately, luck wasn't on his side, because oblivious Head Girl Evans turned to him and Isa.

"You two are together, right?"

Regulus, who had just stolen a glance at James, replied first, clipped and immediate. "No."

Isa, unfazed, answered a half-second later. "No."

James let out an indignant snort — pointedly aimed at Isa.

Sirius leaned back in his chair with an exaggerated sigh. "These two are in endless denial."

Amaryllis nodded sagely. "I think so too."

Regulus winced — this was exactly the kind of conversation he wanted to avoid at all costs. Seeing the perfect opportunity to escape, he swiftly got to his feet. "I'm getting the rose thorns."

James stood up too. "I'll help."

They reached the ingredients cupboard, standing close enough to speak in hushed voices without being overheard.

James exhaled, still looking vaguely irritated but also oddly… open. Something concerned flickered in his eyes.

"You alright?" he muttered.

Regulus didn't hesitate. "Yeah."

James studied him for a moment, then nodded.

Regulus narrowed his eyes slightly. "Are we really going to waste this rare window of opportunity talking about my well-being and not about whatever the hell your problem is with Isa?"

"I don't have a problem with Nott," James snapped — far too quickly, and in a tone just slightly too high to be convincing.

Regulus gave him a flat look. "You do — a very obvious one, too. People might start noticing."

James didn't respond straight away. Then, in a low voice, he asked, "Have you ever hooked up with her since… well, you know. That

time?”

Regulus froze for the briefest second.

That was an odd question. Awfully direct, too. And there was no clear reason for it — normally, James only went full anti-Isa when there were rumours about them in circulation or when some daft Prophet journalist had nothing better to write about than Britain’s supposed most-anticipated couple.

But there were no new headlines. No whispers in the halls.

Which meant—

Regulus’s stomach twisted.

He knew.

Isa had slept in his dorm.

James *knew.*

Yes, he didn’t know how — but he was positive, completely sure — James *knew* .

Regulus kept his voice level. “No. I haven’t.”

James raised an eyebrow. “Really? You’re always together.”

Regulus blinked, not able to keep the irritation completely out of his voice. “Yes, James. What else is new?”

James hesitated, then shrugged, his tone too casual.

“So… you’ve got the kind of friendship where you’re with each other constantly, even sleeping next to each other and that’s just… meaningless?”

Regulus’s stomach twisted.

Yes, he *knew*.

But how?

Regulus’s mind raced. How did he know?

Regulus inhaled sharply, then narrowed his eyes. “James, do you use

your cloak to spy on people in their dorms?"

James looked genuinely appalled. "No. That's sick, Reg."

Regulus, watching his face carefully, could tell he meant it.

But then… *how did he know?*

His brain felt like it was short-circuiting.

God. With all that had happened yesterday and *this* was what his brain had to be wrecked about.

Wanting to shut it up, he squared his shoulders and looked James dead in the eye. "Right. Well, I haven't hooked up with her since… then… nor do I want to, nor do I intend to." He gestured vaguely at the shelf. "Go find some Veritaserum if you don't believe me."

James held up an apologetic hand. "No, sorry. You're right. I believe you."

Regulus arched an eyebrow, not completely sure whether James, in fact, believed him, but quickly grabbed the rose thorns and headed back to the table.

Now, if Regulus had thought that little chat had done the trick, he was in for an unpleasant surprise.

Because the moment he went to fetch the peppermint essence, James was there again, conveniently reaching for the ingredient that was, of course, very difficult to find and impossible to carry alone.

"Still," James said, flawlessly continuing their previous conversation, voice all casual-like, "have you ever wondered if she might like you?"

Regulus groaned, grabbing the small vial with more force than strictly necessary. "Oh, *come on*. Not this again. We are *not* doing this again."

James tilted his head slightly. "No, but really. With Davies… gone—"

Regulus couldn't suppress the stiffening at the mention of him.

"—and, well… you two do make the dream couple," James finished.

Regulus snorted. "I don't think it works like that." He gave James a pointed look. "It's not something on demand. Would be easier for me too, wouldn't it? But here I am. Not loving her, but instead loving y

—”

Fuck.

He cut himself off abruptly, but the damage was already done. Somewhere between his frustration and his words, his eyes had met James’s.

They both knew exactly what he had been about to say.

James blushed.

It was just the faintest hint of pink dusting his cheeks, but it was enough — enough for Regulus to see it, enough for him to feel it.

His heart ached.

Then, all at once, reality snapped back into place. James cleared his throat, blinking rapidly as if trying to shake something off. Regulus swallowed and looked away first. They walked back in silence.

The conversation looked to have reassured James enough to put a stop to his full violent-mode on Isa. The downside was, however, that he now turned to his smug mode. And that, in turn, unfortunately, always brought out a particular side of Isa.

Isa tapped her wand against the rim of the cauldron. “Alright, now with the egg in, we’ll need to stir… counterclockwise, then set for seven minutes.”

James leaned back in his chair, looking supremely unimpressed. “Yeah, we *know*, Nott.” He gestured lazily between himself, Sirius and Evans. “We got an Outstanding on our O.W.Ls.”

Isa dipped a hip and arched a brow. “How *very* impressive.” She theatrically waved a hand at the entire group. “I think you’ll find *we all* got Outstandings on our O.W.L.s.”

Evans, clearly sensing the tension, quickly attempted to divert the conversation. “How did you do on your O.W.L.s, then?” she asked, looking at the sixth-years.

Sirius perked up, turning to Regulus. “Yeah, how many did you get?”

Regulus, who had very much not been planning on participating in any of this, opened his mouth, then immediately closed it again.

It was Isa who cheerfully provided the answer. "He's got eleven. Not just O.W.L.s — *Outstandings*."

Sirius let out a short laugh, shaking his head. "Of course he did."

His voice was sarcastic, but Regulus didn't miss the unmistakable glint of pride in his eyes. It made him utterly uncomfortable.

Isa turned her attention to James, letting her gaze sweep over him from head to toe before she smirked. "I got twelve. All Outstandings."

James shot her a deadpan look. "God do you have a *life*, Nott?"

Isa tossed him a challenging glare. "Oh, absolutely. I think it's just that, you know… Reg and I studied together all the time…"

Regulus's eyebrows shot up as he turned to Isa, very slowly.

What the *fuck* was happening?

James scoffed. "Funny. Didn't he spend *months* at Beauxbatons and evening after evening on the Quidditch pitch? That doesn't exactly leave a lot of time to *study*, does it?"

Regulus, now thoroughly done with whatever this was, cleared his throat. "Right. I'll get the unicorn hair strands."

"I'll get the jobberknoll feathers," Evans chimed, following him.

Meanwhile, James and Isa continued their bickering in the background, voices growing sharper with every exchange.

Evans, watching them with growing bewilderment, turned to Regulus, lowering her voice. "Do they… have *history*?"

Regulus groaned, rubbing his temples. "No."

Regulus and Evans returned to the table to find James lounging back in his chair, lazily munching on an apple like he hadn't a care in the world.

Evans folded her arms. "Eating in Potions class is forbidden for a reason, Potter."

Isa scoffed. "How they made *you* Head Boy is one of life's great mysteries."

James, entirely unfazed, shot her a smug look. “Not just Head Boy either. Captain, too — the first in *decades* to hold both titles at the same time.”

Isa was undoubtedly to retort something nasty, but Sirius cut him short. He looked vaguely confused but also a little exasperated, and waved a hand.

“Alright, Prongs, we get it. You’re an unstoppable force of nature. Now, let’s tone it down before you start serenading yourself.”

He turned and wandered over to the large cauldron at Slughorn’s desk, peering into the shimmering potion before leaning in to take a theatrical sniff. Then, he smirked.

“So… what does it smell like to you lot?”

He turned to Evans first, grin widening. “Let me guess — parchment, ink and cinnamon?”

Evans rolled her eyes and pointedly ignored him.

James, still leaning back, tilted his head. “And what do you smell, Padfoot?”

Sirius took another dramatic sniff, then grinned. “I smell *you*, mate.”

James immediately burst into laughter, nearly choking on his apple.

Isa turned to him, unimpressed. “Let me guess — seeing as your head’s stuck up there all the time, I’d wager you mostly smell your *arse*.”

James’s eyes glinted with something wicked, something challenging. He leaned back even further in his chair, looking completely content.

“Oh no, Nott,” he said smoothly, taking a slow, deliberate bite of his apple. “I don’t smell *mine*.”

Regulus, who had been preoccupied with not paying attention, suddenly realised exactly what James meant.

He choked.

Isa, for once, had nothing to offer in return — no snark, no immediate comeback, just an uncomfortable sort of stiffening before she turned abruptly on her heel and busied herself at the cupboard, her cheeks tinged pink at the discomfort of James’s insinuation.

Regulus, forcing down the heat creeping up his own neck, shot James an annoyed glare.

James was unfazed by Regulus's withering glare and only shrugged — all smug, lazy arrogance, like he'd just won something.

How was he going to survive an entire year of this?

*****

Regulus felt like he needed a full week to recover from Potions class, but his schedule was, as always, utterly lethal. Tuesday was packed with lessons and the evening was reserved for Quidditch practice.

So when Valaine turned out to be sick, sparing him a double period of Defence and gifting him some precious time to work on his Transfiguration homework, it felt like a small miracle.

Evan and Barty, however, weren't nearly as pleased.

"And she was ill last week too," Evan grumbled, piling his plate with an ungodly amount of roast potatoes, as if sheer carb consumption could compensate for the academic injustice.

"Yes — the *one* subject that actually matters," Barty huffed. "And we're missing it."

Isa smirked over her pumpkin pasty. "Ah, Crouch, you missing Valaine?"

Barty smirked back, sharp as ever. "Well, she's the only Professor I *don't* mind looking at all day."

Evan barked a laugh.

Regulus, despite himself, let out a laugh too, shaking his head as he turned his attention to the Transfiguration book resting on his lap. "Honestly, it's a relief. Two extra hours to actually finish my homework — especially with practice later."

Evan gave him a sympathetic look. "Yeah, I feel you, mate. Your schedule's lethal."

Barty tilted his head, eyes glinting. "You *do* realise you're *Captain* now, right?"

Regulus arched a brow. "Obviously."

Barty grinned. “Which means you’ve got access to the Prefect’s bathroom. Have you been?”

Regulus shook his head.

“Oh, mate, it’s fantastic,” Barty said, leaning back dramatically. “Huge marble tub, golden taps, enough bubbles to drown half the castle. Absolute paradise.”

Regulus quirked a brow. “Alright, that actually sounds… decent.”

Evan speared a sausage with his fork. “I always wondered… can you sneak someone in there?”

Isa shook her head. “No. Door seals shut the moment someone enters. You know — for obvious reasons.”

Barty nodded. “And there are about a dozen snitching portraits at the entrance. I tried sneaking Eira in once but the portraits scared her off.”

Regulus and Isa snorted.

Then, with a shift in expression that should have been warning enough, Barty’s face turned wicked. He leaned in slightly, his grin almost feline.

“But it’s nice, Black. You need a little stress relief — imagine it: hot water, clouds of steam, no one around… the perfect opportunity for a bit of, you know… *solo relaxation*.”

He bit his lip, eyes twinkling with barely suppressed laughter. Evan let out a poorly stifled snigger.

It took Regulus a second too long to catch on. One beat. Then another.

Then — oh.

He choked on his sandwich. He felt the heat crawling up his neck.

He pointedly did not look at Isa.

Isa was equally appalled. She groaned loudly. “Crouch, *for Merlin’s sake*, don’t talk about that stuff when I’m around.”

Barty gave her a mockingly sympathetic look. “No, no, Nott — you’re one of the blokes now. And this—” he gestured vaguely “—comes with

the package."

Isa folded her arms. "First of all, since when am I 'one of the blokes'? And second, why, exactly, does discussing… *that* come with any package?"

Evan, still sniggering, threw her a look. "Oh, Nott, you became one of the blokes when you spent a month sleeping between us."

Isa rolled her eyes, exasperated but undeniably amused against herself.

Regulus exhaled deeply, rubbing his temples.

*****

Despite the discomfort of the conversation and the innuendos of Barty, the idea of a bath in the Prefect bathroom after practice was undeniably appealing. He never showered in the locker rooms, and well, it'd be a nice break from the shower in the dorm, especially with Crabbe's uncanny ability to occupy it *exactly* when Regulus needed it after practice.

Unfortunately, his plans were cut short by none other than the person he'd been actively avoiding since that painfully uncomfortable Potions class — James.

Practice had gone alright. The Chasers and Beaters were solid, though the Keeper needed work. Regulus quickly realised that he'd have to pour all his faith into Miller — with Slytherin facing the trio of the Macmillan sisters and James in October, having a weak link in front of the hoops was far from ideal. But once Miller got her hands on a Quaffle, she was relentless — so yes, he pinned all his hopes on her.

As he walked with the team toward the locker room, Regulus spotted James leaning casually against the stone wall outside. His expression — a mix of discomfort and apology — was a stark contrast to the smugness that had been plastered onto his face the night before.

Regulus quirked an unimpressed brow, not particularly looking forward to a conversation with James, and said goodbye to his team. He pushed the door open and James, predictably, followed him inside.

Regulus didn't bother to hide his irritation. "Spying on your upcoming opponent, *Captain* Potter?"

James glanced around, making sure the locker room was empty before exhaling sharply, ruffling a hand through his already-messy hair.

“No… I came to… apologise.”

Oh, that was interesting. James coming to apologise.

Regulus arched a brow, barely concealing a smirk. “For what exactly, Potter?” A beat of silence. “What *is it* that you’ve done?”

James rolled his eyes. “I was a prick. I’m sorry.”

Regulus nodded, then shrugged. “Yeah, you were.”

James huffed a laugh, shaking his head. “I just… didn’t know… I just —”

Regulus crossed his arms. “Didn’t know how to behave like anything other than an arrogant prat?”

James groaned, ruffling his hair again. “Was it *that* bad?”

Regulus considered this.

“It wasn’t good.”

Still, no matter how much Regulus wanted to be annoyed at James for his insufferable arrogance, something tugged at his chest. James was a good person — his company was, generally, quite enjoyable. If he had acted out, there had to be a reason. And something told Regulus this wasn’t just about jealousy over Isa — that there was much more under the surface that he was taking out on her and her role in his life.

Regulus inhaled deeply, standing resolute before him. “Alright. I have a proposition.”

James lifted his head, eyeing him warily. “…What?”

Regulus exhaled, arms still crossed. “You know, we normally handle things one of two ways.”

James arched a brow.

“Either we punch,” Regulus explained. “Or we cry.”

James snorted, nodding at the realisation. “Yeah. That… that sounds about right.”

Regulus gave him a pointed look. “Alright. How about we add a third option?”

James frowned. “Like what?”

Regulus tilted his head. “How about… actually getting it off your chest? You know… with words.”

It took James a moment to process, blinking at him as if Regulus had just suggested something utterly absurd. Regulus couldn’t completely blame him — it *was* rather uncharacteristic for them.

Regulus sighed, shifting his stance. “Talk to me, James. What’s got your wand in a knot?”

James inhaled sharply, his hands trembling slightly as they ran over his face. “I’m scared if I do, I’ll… chase you away,” he admitted, voice hoarse. He let out a bitter laugh. “Which, honestly, would probably be the best thing — we both know that. But still…”

Regulus felt something tighten in his chest. He forced a wry smile, sitting down on the bench across from him.

This was bad — something was really troubling him.

“I promise not to run. No retaliation. Just say whatever it is, and we’ll forget about it after, if that’s what you want.”

James’s face shifted, wrecked, raw, vulnerable. Then, finally, his voice cracked. “I feel like I’m being eaten from the inside, Reg.”

Regulus swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. He didn’t speak, didn’t move — just gave James the space to get it out, even though he could *feel* the emotion in James’s words.

“There’s no way to justify this anymore,” James whispered, staring down at his hands. “But I can’t—” He cut himself off, exhaling sharply.

Regulus had a sinking feeling where this was going. He braced himself, pointedly shoving down the panic growing in his head.

James lifted his gaze then, and *fuck*, there was something so *genuine*, so *vulnerable* in his eyes that it hurt.

“When it started, you know… you and me… I just thought—” His breath hitched. “I just thought, let’s figure out what *this* is first before

we — before we *look further*." He let out a humourless chuckle, shaking his head. "I mean, to fancy a bloke…" His voice trailed off, heavy.

Regulus nodded slightly, not trusting himself to speak.

James sighed, running a hand through his hair again, clearly grasping for words. "And *specifically* you — my best friend's *brother* — and all the… complications that come with that. I just thought we'd see first before — before worrying about anything else."

Regulus nodded again, feeling a lump forming in his throat. He knew, of course, exactly what James was talking about.

"But then…" James hesitated. "We actually — you know — started to *love* each other."

James flinched.

Regulus felt himself do the same.

James let out a shaky breath. "And now I'm stuck, Reg. I'm *stuck*."

Regulus remained silent as James clenched his fists, pressing them against his knees.

"I don't know how to put this into words in a way that doesn't — *doesn't* chase you away, but… I am *not supposed* to love someone like you."

Regulus knew it, had had this thought himself, too, had even *heard* it already from James in some covert, indirect way — but this, hearing it spelled out so directly, felt like someone was suffocating him.

His throat burned, but he swallowed the sting behind his eyes.

James swallowed hard. "Oh, Reg, you're so—" His voice cracked again. "You're so *beautiful*, and when you *laugh* —"

The words set a painful ache settling in Regulus's chest.

James let out a choked breath. "It's the most wonderful thing, Reg. When you laugh. And you *deserve* it. You *deserve* to laugh. You've had so much pain and hardship in your life and *fuck*, I just — I just want to make you laugh all day."

Regulus ignored the way his vision blurred slightly, and noticed James

was doing the same.

James exhaled, shaking his head. “And I know… *so much* has happened. And there’s so much I don’t understand. I just thought — if we were to just get on with it, it would… sort of fix itself, you know? Just dive into the deep and hope for the best.”

Regulus nodded, understanding all too well. “But it only got more complicated.”

James cleared his throat. “Yeah. And now we’re here… and I know so many good things about you, Reg. You’re — you’re a *good* person. A good person to whom bad things happened.”

Regulus braced himself.

James exhaled shakily. “But there are parts of you I can’t… justify loving.” His voice wavered. “My mind can’t wrap itself around it. But my heart can. Can you — can you understand that, Reg?” He looked at him desperately, searching for something. “I don’t know how much you’re involved, how much you *want* to be involved at some point, but I know you’re… ideologically… with them. And I can’t love someone who shares their ideology. *Can I?* ”

Silence.

Then, wrecked, James whispered, “But I do. I *do* love you. I don’t like that part of you, but I do *fucking love* you.”

Regulus ran a hand down his face, overwhelmed by emotions he couldn’t decipher.

Every single word struck hard and relentlessly. Nothing was new, Regulus knew all of it, had heard all of it, had thought all of it, yet he felt completely overwhelmed by how James sat there, lost for words, lost in thoughts, lost in feelings and emotions he clearly didn’t know what to do with.

To see James — always optimistic, always certain — so lost, so torn…

James let out a bitter laugh. “And now we’re here, and I’ve been lying to Sirius for so long — and he’s practically my brother.” Then, quickly, “I *know* he’s your brother, but you know what I mean. And I’ve been lying to him, I’ve betrayed him.” His voice cracked. “I mean… he obviously *loves* you, and I don’t think he’d even, in theory, *mind* — you know… *us* — but with you being with *them*, and me

having lied about it for *years* … No. He wouldn't understand that."

Regulus looked at him steadily, feeling that James was selling himself short. "Then why did you lie?"

James frowned. "What do you mean?"

Regulus tilted his head. "There's a reason you lied, James. A viable one. You did it for a reason."

James fell silent.

Regulus pressed on. "First — you did it to protect me, to protect us. You know that Sirius knowing forms a major risk. We didn't know how him leaving the family would end — didn't know whether they'd get their hands on him, probe his mind. And Sirius wears his heart on his sleeve, James. Sirius's personal opinions about… us… were really the least of our problems back then. We'd be potentially *fucked* if he knew, James."

James swallowed hard.

"And second," Regulus continued, his voice quieter now, "even if we *were* on the same side in all of this, we come from two of the most prestigious, pureblood families out there. You really think we could *be together*, openly, and no one would bat an eye? War aside?"

James's voice was small. "My parents wouldn't mind."

Regulus shot him a knowing, wry smile. "The world isn't just your parents, James."

James exhaled heavily, rubbing his face.

Regulus inhaled deeply. "Look," he said, voice steady but careful. It took considerate effort to let the words roll off his lips. "I think we… are going to have to accept that at some point, it will be over… between us. " He winced. "It's fucking hard but… we will have to accept it… at some point."

James groaned, tilting his head back. "I know, Reg."

Something shifted between them then. Regulus moved to sit next to James on the bench, their shoulders brushing. James exhaled and leaned his head against Regulus's shoulder, closing his eyes.

Silence stretched between them — not uncomfortable, not strained.

Just… silence. Beautiful. Weightless.

After a moment, James cracked open an eye. “You know,” he murmured, “that actually *did* help.”

Regulus smirked.

James huffed a laugh. “You discovered a new technique for us, Black.”

Regulus snorted.

Then, slowly, James lifted his hand, fingertips grazing Regulus’s cheek before he leaned in and kissed him. His tongue swept over Regulus’s bottom lip before sliding into his mouth, tasting him, teasing him.

It was slow, deep, so much emotion poured into it that Regulus felt his breath catch. There was longing in the way James kissed him — desperation, tenderness, something breaking apart and mending all at once. It felt overwhelming, moving, too much and not enough all at once.

They kissed for a while, softly and tenderly, before it became something more, something heated.

James’s fingers threaded through Regulus’s hair, tugging just enough to make him gasp softly against his lips. Regulus clutched at his collar, pulling him closer, tilting his head to deepen the kiss, feeling James shudder slightly as their bodies pressed together.

But then — Regulus pulled back, breathless.

“Alright,” he whispered. “You have your cloak with you, James?”

James blinked. “Obviously.”

“Brilliant,” Regulus nodded. “I have an idea.”

*****

Regulus walked over the Hogwarts grounds and then through the corridors with his pulse thrumming beneath his skin.

The anticipation curled in his stomach — part thrill, part sense, a great part arousal. James walked behind him, hidden under the Invisibility Cloak, his presence, although invisible, absolutely tangible.

“This is very stealthy of us, Black,” James murmured, voice laced with amusement. “Very illicit. Almost criminal, really.”

Regulus rolled his eyes but a smirk tugged at his lips.

“You’re the one sneaking into the Prefect’s bathroom,” he whispered back.

“Yes, but *you’re* the one sneaking me in,” James countered, and Regulus could *hear* the grin in his voice.

A huff of laughter escaped before Regulus could stop it. He quickly pressed his lips together, but he realised it was too late when several passing students turned their heads in confusion.

This, of course, led James to make it his life’s mission to get Regulus to laugh again, drawing as many confused gazes from fellow students and portrait occupants as possible along the way.

“See, this is what I mean,” he mused, still whispering. “The laughing? The most beautiful thing in the world.”

Regulus bit the inside of his cheek, fighting both another smile and the blush creeping up his neck. “Shut up, Potter.”

He heard James snigger behind him.

When they finally reached the Prefect’s bathroom, he hesitated, glancing at the entrance. “You might want to…” he whispered, shifting on his feet, “hold on to me… so the door doesn’t shut before you enter.”

A beat of silence. Then—

“Oh,” James whispered, right against his ear. “I *like* that.”

A shudder ran down Regulus’s spine, unexpected and electric.

And then — James’s hands, still concealed beneath the cloak, grazed around his waist. Warm, steady. Regulus felt James’s breath ghosting over the side of his neck, so unbearably close.

Regulus swallowed hard, his heart hammering against his ribs, each beat sending unparalleled longing, aching, fire through his body.

This — this was the only thing he could offer.

They couldn't sit together at meals, where James could unload his thoughts and frustrations. They couldn't talk in corridors, where Regulus could simply ask how he was doing. They couldn't study in the library, where he could secretly grab his hand under the table.

There was no way to check on him, to reassure him, to make him feel better — except for this.

No, this was all he had to offer. The private sanctuary of the Prefects' bathroom, where they could be alone, where no one would know they were there, where they could exist in their own, safe cocoon for an hour or so.

And if this was all he had to offer — then he would give it to James completely.

So without another word, Regulus pushed open the door, letting James follow.

As the door clicked shut behind them, Regulus took in the grand bathroom before him — and realised that Barty had been absolutely right; the bathroom was *exquisite*.

The white marble, the stained glass windows filtering the moonlight into beautiful colours on the floor, the massive sunken bath stretched out in the middle of the room, lined with dozens of golden taps, each promising something different…. It was breathtaking.

For a moment, neither of them moved.

Then James shrugged off the cloak, dropping it onto the marble floor. He stood before Regulus, only inches away, close enough for Regulus to identify all the different shades of hazel in his eyes, to see the faint freckles on his cheeks.

Regulus's breath caught.

James looked beautiful.

His messy hair was as wild as ever, his hazel eyes warm, searching. But there was something else, too — something vulnerable in the way he watched Regulus, something that made Regulus's throat feel tight.

He took a step closer, heart hammering, hands reaching.

James didn't stop him.

Regulus undid the buttons of James's shirt with careful fingers, sliding the fabric from his shoulders, letting it fall away. His palms brushed over his warm, bare skin, tracing the sharp lines of his collarbones, the muscles beneath. He reached for James's belt next, fingers slow, measured. The buckle clinked softly in the quiet. Then he tugged the fabric loose, working the fastenings of his trousers, sliding them down inch by inch until they pooled at James's feet.

James sucked in a breath, but he didn't break eye contact.

Regulus didn't, either.

Swiftly, he pulled off his own Quidditch clothes, dropping them onto the floor too as James watched.

And then—

And then they were both completely naked, fully exposed before each other, making Regulus swallow hard.

He pointedly ignored how both their bodies betrayed how aroused they were, standing there, naked in front of each other, and instead reached for James's hand wordlessly.

James let himself be led, let Regulus pull him toward the bath, where they turned the taps together.

It became clear very quickly that, unlike Regulus, this wasn't James's first time in the Captain bathroom — that did very little to temper his enthusiasm, though.

James lit up, launching straight into an explanation of how everything worked. He eagerly pointed out which taps did what — one released thick, foamy bubbles that smelled of lavender and cedarwood, another sent warm jets of scented steam into the air, and yet another turned the water into a mesmerising swirl of different colours.

Regulus watched amused how James was delighting in the moment like a child, turning tap after tap, filling the bath with soft swirls of colours and thick foam.

After watching him go about for some minutes, Regulus arched a brow, stifling his laugh. "Finished?"

James grinned, reaching for one more. A shimmering silver stream spilled out, fizzing as it met the water's surface. "*Now* I'm finished."

Regulus shook his head, but his smile lingered. “Alright,” he said, stepping in first, letting the warmth envelop him, muscles sighing at the heat. He settled against the edge, stretching out, then — without a word — pulled James down between his legs.

James went easily, resting against Regulus’s chest, his back pressing against his stomach.

It reminded him oddly of how they’d sat in his bathtub at Black Manor that one time.

Regulus swallowed thickly.

The heat of the water was nothing compared to the heat of James’s skin against his own. He could feel the steady rise and fall of James’s breathing, could *feel* his own arousal — thick, heavy, impossible to ignore — pressed against the small of James’s back.

James, however, was still talking.

“I do wonder though,” he nodded, “why red and yellow make orange in paint, but here in the bath—”

Regulus exhaled slowly, then lifted a hand, brushing James’s damp hair aside.

James barely noticed, still speaking, until—

Regulus leaned in and pressed a slow, lingering kiss to the side of his neck.

James inhaled sharply, words cutting off mid-sentence.

Regulus smirked against his skin.

He did it again — this time lower, his lips trailing a soft path down the curve of James’s throat, then higher again, brushing over his jaw, his earlobe.

He bit down gently.

James shuddered. His breath hitched, a sound slipping past his lips that sent a deep, undeniable throb straight through Regulus’s core.

Regulus smirked.

There was clearly *one* way to shut James Potter up.

He kept kissing his neck as his hands moved slowly, deliberately, trailing over the firm planes of James's chest, fingertips caressing the damp skin. He felt how James shivered, how his breath stuttered when Regulus's fingers brushed over his nipples — soft at first, then firmer, teasing, pinching like he knew James liked.

James groaned, his head falling back against Regulus's shoulder, exposing the long line of his throat. Regulus nearly lost himself at the sight.

He was *so* unbearingly hard. The ache pulsed deep, insistent, desperate — but he forced himself to slow down. To enjoy every second of the way James's body responded to every touch, every brush of lips against his skin. The way his breath came quicker, turning shallow with every teasing kiss to his ear, with every caress.

Regulus dragged his hands lower.

Over the taut lines of his stomach. Down to his hips. Then, lower still, teasing the edges of his thighs — just brushing, never quite giving in.

James's head lolled against his chest, eyes shut, breath ragged. His lips parted, and then—

"Oh, *Reg*."

Regulus briefly closed his eyes, a sharp ache lodging itself deep in his chest.

Oh, how beautiful James was like this. Completely surrendered, all pretense stripped away, all barriers lowered. Nothing but pleasure and longing and trust written across every inch of him.

Regulus pushed down the thoughts of all the harsh truths from their conversation earlier.

For now—

His fingers traced the inside of James's thighs again, feather-light, teasing, drawing another sharp inhale, another tremor of anticipation. And then, finally, *finally*, he wrapped his fingers around him.

James's breath hitched — Regulus *felt* the jolt that ran through his body, the way he tensed for just a moment before relaxing into his touch.

Regulus exhaled shakily, his heart leaping at the sheer intimacy of it — of James in his arms, his hands wrapped around him, hard and aching.

Then, he began to move.

Slow, careful strokes, just enough to draw those sounds from James — the ones that sent fire curling in his stomach, the ones that made his blood burn, his own body throb with want.

James let out a ragged moan, tilting his head back further, baring his throat, the column of it slick with steam and sweat.

Regulus wanted — god, he wanted to see, wanted to have all of it. To see all of James letting go, to feel all of him give in.

So he did what he knew James loved most, what pleased him most — he told him he loved him.

He told him with every stroke, every pull, every flick of his fingers. He told him with his lips, pressing kisses to his neck, his shoulder, his collarbone, teeth grazing the sensitive shell of his ear. And more than anything, he told him with his words — whispering against his skin, telling him how breathtaking he was, how he could spend the entire day just marvelling at the sight of James under his touch, how he wanted nothing more than to hear his hoarse voice for the rest of his life.

He told him how much he loved him for *everything* he was — until James shuddered with pleasure, gasping, releasing in his hands.

Yes — if this was all he could offer, he would give it. If this was all he could give, all he could provide, he would push aside every objection, every nagging thought that lurked in the back of his mind, reminding him that they were only complicating things, only making it harder for themselves and everyone else, the longer they let it last.

Because this — James in his arms, his voice low, intimate, pleading — was the most beautiful thing that could happen to him.

And he'd give it to him.

Thoroughly. Completely. Worshipfully.

Chapter 9: Of Pranks & Concerns

Chapter Notes

> A later update because I was (still partially am) down with the flu.
>
> Enjoy ❤

Regulus drifted through the rest of September and into October with surprising ease.

The biweekly meet-ups in the Prefects' Bathroom seemed to be sufficient proof of his affection for James — enough that James actually managed to be civil to Isa during Potions. With both Isa and James on their best behaviour, the only unsettling thing about the class was Sirius's overly cheerful demeanour.

Sure, Sirius was naturally a lively person — but not around Regulus. Ever since Sirius had left and Regulus had chosen their family over him, Sirius had been, at best, distant — more often than not, outright irritated — whenever they were in the same room. They had learned to coexist, mostly out of necessity due to their year on the same Quidditch team, but Sirius had never been *happy* or *cheerful* in Regulus's presence.

Now, during Potions, he was completely at ease; laughing, cracking jokes, engaging in easy conversation with everyone, including Regulus — the discomfort of which Regulus had been unable to hide with his stiff reactions more often than once. Regulus simply didn't know how to cope with Sirius treating him like something bordering on friendly acquaintance after such a long time being an estranged family member with a lot of baggage.

It took some time for Regulus to figure out what was going on — or, well, some time for the topic to come up with James, who then explained that it was just a way for Sirius to express the fact he, apparently, missed his little brother.

Now, Regulus — wisely so, he thought himself — took this with a grain of salt and considered it basically a tactic for Sirius to win Regulus over, to perhaps get him back, perhaps in his final year at Hogwarts, pull off what he had been trying ever since Sirius had boarded the Hogwarts Express; convince Regulus to abandon their

family's ideology and choose his way of life instead.

Still, apart from the fact that Regulus had a hard time coping with overly cheerful Sirius, it was better now that at least Isa and James weren't locked in some kind of not so subtle battle over who Regulus knew best or whom he liked most. And with Amaryllis and Sirius filling most of the silences, Regulus found that he could easily fade into the background — at least, until Sirius inevitably dragged him back to the front with some awkward banter.

Another noteworthy development was the growing tension between Slytherin and Gryffindor, which had escalated into an all-out prank war. James, of course, claimed to know nothing, to have done nothing — but the series of increasingly chaotic disruptions had the unholy signature of James, Sirius, the werewolf and Pettigrew written all over them.

And well, Regulus knew that, besides trying to win Regulus over at last, there'd be one additional thing Sirius would want in his final year at Hogwarts; leaving school famous, cementing himself as the undisputed King of Mischief alongside his band of lunatics, which meant a full-scale, chaotic explosion of pranks.

In less than a month, the castle had endured a series of absurd disturbances — one evening they had enchanted all the plates in the Great Hall, making food vanish instantly as someone piled it on their plates, leaving everyone — students and staff alike — no choice but to eat directly from the communal serving dishes like a pack of starved animals. Dumbledore, entirely unbothered, had simply chuckled and claimed an entire bowl of treacle tart for himself, dipping a spoon into it with apparent delight. Then there was the matter of Greenhouse Three, where they had secretly overfed a Venomous Tentacula so much that it had begun actively chasing Herbology students, sending at least three second-years in the Hospital Wing with a panic attack. Beside this, they had enchanted the grand staircase to rearrange its landings mid-stip, resulting in complete, utter chaos, several minor injuries and Selwyn stranded on a ledge for hours before being rescued.

And, as of that morning, there was a new one to add to the list; turning the water in the Slytherin dorms into pink slime.

Regulus had been awake for a solid half-hour already, fully dressed in his robes and waiting — not entirely patiently — for Evan and Barty to get ready so they could finally head to breakfast. Unfortunately,

Barty had the chronic need to take an obscenely long shower before setting foot outside the common room — usually just an inconvenience for Regulus and Evan, but that particular morning, very much a problem for Barty himself, too.

Regulus was lounging on his bed, Charms book open beside him, listening to the distant sounds around him and to Barty, muttering something unintelligible, blissfully unaware of whatever horror awaited him.

And then—

“WHAT THE *FUCK*?!”

The shout echoed through the dorm, followed by a loud *thud* and the unmistakable sound of someone slipping and crashing into a wall.

Regulus blinked and turned his head. Evan, sitting on his own bed, looked just as baffled.

More swearing — loud, furious.

“This fucking *school* — oh, I’m going to fucking *murder* someone!”

Regulus and Evan barely had time to exchange another alarmed glance before the dormitory door slammed open with brutal force.

And the sight before them — oh, the sight — it was historical. *Phenomenal*.

Regulus sucked in a sharp breath, his shoulders already shaking. He curled forward slightly, his body instinctively bracing against the laughter threatening to escape.

Barty stood there, dripping — no, *drenched* — head to toe in thick, gelatinous pink slime.

“I’m going to fucking KILL them,” Barty snarled, flinging out his arms in pure rage, sending globs of slime splattering onto the floor. His usually neat hair was slicked back with the gooey mess.

He looked actually homicidal.

Evan let out a high, strangled snort. “What’s up, Barty?” he asked, far too casually, eyes gleaming with suppressed laughter.

Barty pointed an accusing, slime-covered finger at him. “Don’t,” he

growled. “*Do not.*”

Regulus, who had been valiantly trying to keep his composure, exhaled a little too sharply through his nose.

Evan sniggered.

Regulus cleared his throat.

“Well,” he said, fighting for control. “Pink *does* suit you.”

Evan wheezed.

Barty let out a guttural noise of fury. “It’s THEM! Fucking Potter, your brother and their stupid friends!” He flailed an arm in frustration, sending another glob of slime flying.

Regulus clamped a hand over his mouth, shaking with laughter.

Barty seethed. “You think this is funny?”

Regulus, eyes streaming now, barely managed a strangled, “Yes.”

Evan, struggling for breath, tried to compose himself, inhaling deeply before saying, “But — mate — why not just *Scourgify* yourself?”

Barty turned to him with a look of pure disgust. “Oh, Mister Obvious over here. You think I haven’t tried that already? Apparently, if I do that—” he gestured dramatically at his slime-covered self “—the slime *multiplies*.”

That was it — that did it.

Regulus and Evan howled. Doubled over, clutching their stomachs, wheezing, completely losing it as Barty stood there, fuming, dripping pink slime onto the dormitory floor.

*****

Although Regulus did feel for Barty in some way, the pink slime prank was a much appreciated distraction from the fact that he was to go to Grimmauld Place in the afternoon. Cissy had sent him a letter similar to the previous one — not providing much beyond the time he was to go to Slughorn’s office. So, like usual, Regulus had no idea what to suspect and this time, the uncertainty was consuming him — not strange, seeing his last field world had left twenty-one people dead, of whom two he’d had to kill himself.

This time it was also harder because of Isa — he knew she'd worry endlessly and it felt harder now, with her knowing too much, to keep his lives separate. His life at Hogwarts, his life for the Revolution, his life with James… so many parts of him forcibly separated, set apart, and yet — yet Isa had a foot in all of them.

The pink slime prank apparently hadn't been confined to just their dormitory — several Slytherin students had been hit, marching toward the Hospital Wing in hopes of a solution. Barty had been clever enough to sneak into the Prefects' Bathroom for a shower before joining them at breakfast, but the mere walk to the fifth floor had been pride-wounding enough for a lifetime.

Regulus missed the rest of the aftermath — he had practice right after breakfast — but he had no doubt it would be all anyone talked about for the rest of the day.

"Alright, team, brilliant job. Let's wrap it up. Back Monday evening."

As his teammates nodded and gathered their things in the locker room, Regulus slung his broom over his shoulder and headed toward the exit too. Miller was ahead of him, her shoelaces trailing behind her as she walked out.

Regulus quickly caught up with her, feeling for the slightly clumsy girl. Besides, he truly couldn't afford any injuries on the team with the match against Gryffindor only two weeks away.

"Mind your shoelaces, Miller," he noted.

She flushed dark red, quickly crouching to fumble with her laces, her fingers clumsy in her rush.

Regulus was aware that his presence, and especially his eyes on her hands, didn't particularly speed up the process. He could practically feel how much she wished he wasn't standing there watching her.

A part of him debated just walking away, letting her deal with it, but then — she fumbled again. A small, exasperated sound left her, and that was enough to make him cave.

"You know there's a spell for that?" he remarked.

Miller blinked up at him, momentarily caught off guard. "...No?"

Regulus took out his wand, demonstrating the motion and showing

the incantation. Miller copied him hesitantly, then again with more confidence. When her laces knotted themselves neatly, she beamed.

Regulus smiled.

“Thank you, Captain Black.”

Regulus’s smile vanished.

“That’s *not* a thing, Miller.”

She turned even redder, scrambling for a response. “Yes — I know — sorry — Captain Black — no — Captain — I —”

Regulus resisted the urge to rub his temples. It was clear the girl was suffering.

“Alright, Miller,” he said instead, scratching his head a tad awkwardly. “See you.”

She nodded quickly — too quickly — and hurried off toward the castle, clearly desperate to escape.

Regulus exhaled, amused, shaking his head slightly—

“So, Captain Black, been conquering any hearts as of late?”

He barely had time to register the voice before he let out a small, *very* undignified squeal, spinning around to see James materialising out of thin air.

“For the millionth time — *don’t* do that, James.”

James leaned lazily against a tree, smug and looking far too pleased with himself.

“How is… she so… relentless on a broom?” he asked, nodding toward Miller’s retreating form.

Regulus raised his eyebrows. “And so helpless on the ground?”

James nodded, grinning. “Yeah.”

Regulus shrugged. “I don’t know.” A pause. Then — his eyes narrowed slightly. “Wait — are you spying on my practice?”

James snorted. “No, Captain Black—”

Regulus shot him a glare.

James only smirked wider. “Practice is on an open field, and besides, we really don’t need it.”

Regulus shot James an unimpressed look. “So, you’re sneaking up on the other Captains as well?”

James bit his lip in that maddening way, still leaning smugly against the tree, his eyes twinkling. “Nah, that’s special treatment I leave for one special Captain.”

Regulus remained unfazed. “How romantic, Potter.”

James grinned, pushing off the tree and falling into step beside him as they crossed the otherwise empty grounds. The wind was sharp, biting at their skin — chilly enough to keep everyone inside. But James, as always, was undeterred, hands tucked into his pockets, watching Regulus with that insufferable gleam in his eye.

“Don’t you have another colour of slime to prepare for the showers?” Regulus asked dryly.

James threw his head back, laughing hard, and Regulus pointedly ignored the flutter it sent through his stomach. “Tell me,” James said, still grinning, “who did we hit?”

Regulus turned to look at him, eyebrows raised, trying to mask his amusement. “Barty.”

James let out a victorious laugh, practically glowing. “Oh, *yes*. We got Crouch.” He turned to Regulus with eager mischief. “Tell me — how pissed off was he?”

Regulus snorted, his mind flashing to Barty, covered head to toe in pink slime, shouting bloody murder. “Very.”

James laughed again, loud and unapologetic, and something warm and unwanted curled in Regulus’s chest. “Glad it wasn’t you, though.”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “Oh, how gracious. Chivalry isn’t dead yet, apparently.”

James smirked. “Oh, but a small part of me hoped you’d get hit.” He shot Regulus a sideways glance, his voice dropping into something low and teasing. “So I could help… you know… wash it off in the

Prefects' Bathroom."

Regulus snorted, shaking his head. "What, James — twice a week doesn't satisfy your needs?"

James laughed again, eyes gleaming. "There's no such thing as enough with you, Reg."

Regulus rolled his eyes, but he couldn't quite suppress the tiny smirk threatening his lips. By now, they were nearly at the castle. The wind howled past them, rustling the trees and making the torches by the entrance flicker.

Regulus hesitated for a beat, then exhaled. "I'm… going to visit my mum. I'll be gone until tomorrow."

James's teasing expression softened slightly, concern flickering over his face. "Can I do… anything?"

Regulus pushed down the guilt of lying to him, then shook his head. "Nah."

They reached the steps, slowing as if neither of them quite wanted to part just yet.

Regulus exhaled, then gave James a look. "You could spare the Slytherins a bit this weekend in your stupid prank war, though."

James placed a hand over his heart in mock sympathy. "Sorry, *that* I cannot do."

Regulus huffed, shaking his head as he turned toward the entrance, but he was laughing as he walked away.

*****

As expected, the slime prank was still the topic of discussion even late in the afternoon.

"How do they do it?" Barty hissed, still bristling with indignation.

They were gathered in their usual corner of the common room. Isa was curled up in one of the plush armchairs, Amaryllis and Melania sat cross-legged on the sofa, while Barty, Evan, Mulciber, Avery, Severus and Regulus occupied the remaining seats.

"You think they actually managed to get into the common room?"

Mulciber asked, his voice low with suspicion.

Evan scoffed. “Impossible. They’d be hexed to hell before they even made it past the entrance.”

Isa tapped her fingers against the armrest thoughtfully. “Perhaps they didn’t need to enter. Maybe they found a way through the pipes and worked their little magic there.”

Regulus remained silent — he knew very well how James could have entered, how he had entered before.

God, if people knew that James had an *Invisibility Cloak*…

“Doesn’t matter how they did it,” Barty said, leaning forward with a dangerous glint in his eye. “What matters is getting them back. Revenge is going to be *bittersweet* .”

Evan nodded. “Agreed. They’ll regret this.”

Avery smirked. “Let’s stick our heads together — make it something spectacular.”

Barty turned to Regulus. “You in?”

Regulus shifted slightly in his seat. He pointedly avoided Isa’s gaze as he exhaled before answering, “Nah. I’m heading home.”

He instantly felt Isa’s stare burning into him, but he didn’t meet her gaze. Instead he offered an awkward smile to the rest of the group that looked at him with sympathetic eyes.

“When will you be back, mate?” Evan asked after a beat.

“Tomorrow,” Regulus answered simply.

Barty gave an easy nod. “Alright. We’ll work out the details, and you can add to it when you’re back.”

Regulus nodded, though, in truth, he couldn’t care less about pranks or retaliation.

Now it was getting closer, all he could think about was the same thoughts, the same questions. What was he going to do? Where was he going to go? Would it be like last time? Who would be there?

Just thinking about it made his stomach twist.

The conversation around him continued, but after another half hour, Regulus stood, stretching slightly. “Well — see you all tomorrow.”

A chorus of casual goodbyes followed, Barty waving him off with a lazy “Later, Black.”

Just before turning away, he caught Isa’s gaze — contemplative and concerned. She looked uncharacteristically pale, too.

He sighed.

This was exactly why he didn’t want her to know anything.

Isa and her stupid sharp brain.

Regulus averted his gaze and walked toward the exit, but before he could step out, he was stopped by a sharp tug at his robes.

He glanced down at Isa.

“What is it, Ies?” Regulus asked, his voice low and not completely masking his irritation.

Isa didn’t answer — she looked at him, eyes a combination of sad and worried, and then, without warning, crashed into him, her arms wrapping tightly around his waist.

Regulus stiffened, caught slightly off guard and not unaware of the fact they were blocking the way out of the common room. He wasn’t unaware either of the many eyes on them — their friends watching them from their corner and several other interested Slytherins too.

“Hug me, Black,” Isa muttered against his shoulder.

He let out a short snort, looping his arms loosely around her in return.

God, she could be so dramatic.

A muffled noise of disapproval came from Isa. “Hug me like you mean it, Reg. Come on — grip me.”

Regulus rolled his eyes but, albeit a bit reluctantly, tightened his hold, pressing her a little closer.

He pointedly ignored Barty’s smug smirk.

Isa finally stepped back, tipping her chin up at him. “That’s not how

you hug someone, Reg — not when…."

He sighed, a small, sympathetic smile curling at his lips. "When what, Ies?"

She hesitated, her voice quieter now. "When… you know. You're going there."

Regulus held her gaze for a moment.
How much her meddling with everything and her insatiable curiosity annoyed him, her genuine concern, the way she always looked out for him, stood at his side unconditionally — it made something warm settle in his chest.

He stroked a lock of gold from her face and tucked it behind her ear.

"I'll be fine, Ies. You'll see me tomorrow."

Isa looked unconvinced, but after a beat, she nodded.

"That better be the case, Black," she said firmly. "Now hug me like you mean it."

Regulus let out a long-suffering sigh but indulged her this time, wrapping his arms around her properly, his head resting easily atop hers.

Isa stepped onto his shoes, laughing when he huffed dramatically and started walking them into a slow circle.

"I'll be fine, Ies," he murmured against her hair as they fell into a quiet, firm and lingering embrace. "Don't go worrying about me all the time now, alright?"

Isa let out a snort against his chest. "Yeah, I'll try, Reg."

They remained like that for some time — her body perfectly melting into his, arms around his waist, face settled against his chest and locked by Regulus's head resting on hers.

Naturally, it couldn't last.

Across the room, Barty and Evan were exchanging words, sniggering at the sight of them. Amaryllis and Melania, meanwhile, had something painfully hopeful in their expressions — enough to make Regulus immediately uncomfortable. The other boys looked like they didn't quite know what to do with themselves.

Regulus groaned, rolling his eyes. “I’m letting go now, Ies — before they start writing wedding invitations.”

Isa snorted.

*****

Regulus wasn’t surprised to find out that field work, again, entailed surveillance. What did surprise him was Apparating straight to the same warehouse where he had once accompanied Yaxley and Rodolphus— where they’d been ambushed by four intruders.

A strange sense of déjà vu settled over him as he took in the cavernous hall and the smaller chamber at its front. The table, the detection devices, even the deck of cards—it all looked the same.

Hopefully, the experience would be different this time, though.

“We really managed to tighten security on this one — merely impossible for anyone to get in now,” Yaxley remarked, clearly sensing Regulus’s thoughts.

Regulus nodded, his gaze flickering over the various detection devices scattered across the table. None of them showed any sign of disturbance.

He took the same seat as before, reaching for the cards out of habit.

“That why it’s just the two of us?” he asked, setting the deck beside the bowl of hearty stew and fresh bread that Cissy had packed for him.

Yaxley smirked, pouring himself a glass of dark liquor. “Nah, Magnus is supposed to join us at some point, so we’ll be three.”

Regulus stilled for just a fraction of a second before returning to his food, ignoring the brief pang of discomfort at hearing the name.

God, to realise that he’d actually preferred Rodolphus’s company…

Not that Mr. Nott was unpleasant — he was always polite, composed, and even intriguing — but it felt odd to play cards and drink at a table with Isa’s father. The fact that Yaxley had a particular fondness for making unsubtle insinuations about Isa and Regulus whenever the opportunity arose didn’t help either.

Regulus suppressed a sigh and focused instead on the easy rhythm of

the evening.

It was the same as the last time — just sitting around, eating, drinking, indulging in some easy conversation that was mostly initiated by Yaxley. They played several plays of poker without rush, making lazy bets, barely keeping score. Outside, the October wind howled against the warehouse walls, a reminder of how far removed they were from the rest of the world.

The quiet was eventually broken by the unmistakable crack of Apparition.

Regulus glanced up just as Mr. Nott strolled in, shrugging off his heavy traveling cloak and settling into a chair, wearing his signature charming smile.

“Ah,” he said, reaching for the bottle of liquor at Yaxley’s side of the table. “I see you started without me.”

Yaxley snorted. “I’m sure you can catch up, Magnus.”

Nott glanced at the bottle, then at them, and nodded. “Me too. Let’s have some fun, shall we?”

Yaxley handed him an empty glass and gestured for him to refill his own, too. “I was surprised, though, Magnus — thought you’d be at your estate in Syria for the week.”

Mr. Nott lifted his drink, smiling. “Tomorrow. Vivienne’s already there, meeting with some art clients.”

Yaxley hummed, tilting his head. “Well, the more the merrier. We make a nice group.

Mr. Nott took a leisurely sip before nodding. “Yes, well, and it’s a rather low-key, interesting location too. We’re not expecting anyone to show up here, so we’ll just have a few drinks and make sure to make it through the night awake.”

Regulus raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I’ve heard that one before.”

Mr. Nott chuckled, a rich, warm sound. “Ah, yes, Regulus. You’ve had some rather unfortunate luck, haven’t you? First this warehouse, then the Legot estate… Though, in both cases, I believe everyone was very pleased you were around.”

Yaxley nodded, clearly recalling both incidents.

Regulus sensed this was the perfect moment to finally voice the questions that had been nagging at him ever since he'd read the Prophet's article.

"Yes, well, about Provence…" he started cautiously, shifting slightly in his chair. "Why did we leave without the supplies?"

For a brief moment, an unspoken understanding passed between Yaxley and Nott—a careful, measured consideration of how to respond.

"Oh, but we didn't, Regulus," Mr. Nott said smoothly, taking a slow puff from his cigar. "We managed to swap the supplies just before the French Aurors arrived. It was a very close call, but we succeeded. Of course you were already gone by then."

Yaxley nodded toward the vast, shadowed hall of the warehouse. "And now we're protecting them here."

Regulus exhaled quietly — so, they had secured all the supplies. The French authorities simply didn't know it.

"And," he murmured, tapping his fingers absently against the table, "the tensions… between France and Britain…"

Mr. Nott hummed, watching him with mild interest.

Regulus hesitated for only a second before speaking. "Why… why the Dark Mark?"

Yaxley arched a brow. "What do you mean?"

Regulus leaned forward slightly, his voice even. "Wouldn't it be better to stay off the radar? Low-key? As long as Minchum doesn't declare open war on us, we have the advantage, right? Why provoke it?"

Mr. Nott smirked, exhaling a slow curl of smoke. "Ah, Regulus, thinking like a strategist as always." He tapped his fingers against the side of his glass before continuing. "But it's a little different now. We, rightfully so, didn't expect Minchum to cave just because of this — not after all this time. The Mark, however, ensured other things."

Regulus frowned slightly. "Like what?"

Mr. Nott smiled. "We created chaos between Minchum and the French

— putting enormous strain on his administration. And the advantages of that?" He lifted his glass slightly. "We're already reaping them."

Regulus remained silent, processing the information.

Mr. Nott swirled the liquor in his glass, watching the amber liquid catch the dim light. "And then, of course, there's the matter of insecurity. Was it the Death Eaters or not? The doubt, the chaos, the fear — it erodes people's faith in their government. And when people lose faith in the administration…" He trailed off meaningfully.

Regulus slowly nodded. He understood. The more instability, the easier it became to recruit for the Revolution. They thrived in the fractures of a crumbling system.

The rest of the evening passed like that — with poker games, occasional glances at the steady detection devices, drinking, eating, trading banter. Yaxley and Mr. Nott smoked enough that the room felt starved of oxygen, the air thick with something heady and stale.

It was already late when Regulus had the odd realisation that perhaps, this time, three was indeed a charm. Maybe tonight, unlike the last two times, they really would make it through without a scratch. Maybe, for once, it truly was just surveillance.

And Regulus was right — there were no intruders, no fights, nothing.

Yet, the night took a very strange turn when, so late it was nearly early, the sharp crack of Apparition shattered the quiet.

All three of them tensed, chairs scraping back as they moved instinctively toward their wands.

Regulus barely had time to process the figure standing in the dim light before recognition hit him like a hex to the chest.

This was perhaps the *last* person Regulus expected to show up there.

The Dark Lord.

For a moment, silence stretched between them, thick with an undercurrent of tension. Then, as if commanded by an unspoken cue, they all stood, offering the respectful nods expected in his presence.

The Dark Lord's expression was unreadable — kind, intrigued, polite, yet undeniably powerful. His gaze swept over them, lingering on

Regulus just a fraction longer than the others.

Regulus barely had time to register that this was the first time he'd seen the Dark Lord outside Bellatrix's house. Damascus with Thorne, his first time at this very warehouse, Provence — none of those missions had warranted the Dark Lord's presence.

He also barely had time to wonder what had brought him here — to a supposedly low-profile warehouse in the dead of night — before he was completely caught off guard by the next words spoken.

"I would like to speak with Regulus alone for a moment."

A flicker of something passed between Yaxley and Mr. Nott, both of them exchanging a glance before briefly looking at Regulus. Then, smoothly, they nodded.

"Of course," Mr. Nott said, rising from his seat.

Yaxley offered Regulus a pointed look before following him out of the room, the door clicking shut behind them.

Regulus's heart was racing. His hands were clammy against his clothes.

Why? Why did the Dark Lord want to speak to him alone?

He never did. Not really.

Well — except for that one conversation over the summer holidays… Was it related to that, perhaps? Related to the books the Dark Lord had wanted him to find?

But it turned out to be nothing like what he had expected. In fact, it was almost anticlimactic.

There was no request — no mission, no special reason at all.

If anything, it seemed like the Dark Lord had sought him out for… small talk.

"How have you been?" the Dark Lord asked, his tone smooth. "How is Hogwarts?"

Regulus blinked. "It's… good," he answered, unsure if there was a better response.

The Dark Lord nodded slightly, as if satisfied with that, before regarding him thoughtfully. “Your actions in Provence,” he said, “were remarkable.” His voice was calm, but there was something deliberate in the way he spoke. “You were incredibly brave. Incredibly useful.”

Regulus felt warmth creep up his neck, an odd sort of flush he couldn’t control. “Thank you, my Lord,” he said, dipping his head.

The Dark Lord smiled — a fleeting, knowing expression — before rising from his seat.

Not soon after, he bid them all farewell, undoubtedly Apparating back to Bellatrix’s place, leaving Regulus, Yaxley and Mr. Nott behind in quiet contemplation.

It would be months before Regulus truly understood the significance of that visit. It’d be months, too, before he understood the nagging feeling at the back of his mind — a quiet, insistent thing that would return to him time and again throughout the year.

It would be months.

Months before the pieces began to fall into place.

A puzzle he hadn’t even known existed, with missing fragments he hadn’t even realised were lost.

And when it did — when he finally saw the full picture — it would mark the moment when everything changed.

His life. The Revolution. The course of history itself.

*****

Regulus returned to Hogwarts just before dinner. He had managed to steal a few hours of sleep at Grimmauld Place before Flooing to Slughorn's office and was relieved that, apart from the Dark Lord's unexpected visit, the night had been uneventful. For once, a fieldwork mission had gone exactly as planned.

The cold, wet weather outside made it easy to guess where he’d find his friends — in their usual corner of the common room, reading, chatting and half-heartedly working on their essays. The group was smaller than usual; Avery, Mulciber, and Snape were in the library, leaving only Barty, Evan, Isa, Melania and Amaryllis sprawled across

the sofas and chairs.

As Regulus approached, Barty was the first to notice him, clapping him on the back.
“Everything alright with your mum?” Evan asked.

Regulus nodded, deliberately avoiding their eyes as he sank into the seat beside Isa. “Yeah. All fine.”

It was only then that he got a proper look at her. She was paler than usual, dark circles smudged beneath her eyes, her face drawn with exhaustion.

Regulus watched her from the corner of his eye as the conversation picked up again. Then, in a low voice, he murmured, “Nott, have you slept at all?”

Isa rolled her eyes — not very convincingly, given how utterly drained she looked. “Yes, of course I have.”

Regulus arched an unimpressed brow. “I don’t think you did.”

Isa ignored him, flipping a page in her book as if that would end the discussion.

Regulus sighed and turned his attention back to Barty and Evan’s animated debate about the Hogwarts underground pipeline system — something about whether the castle’s ancient plumbing could be used for smuggling. He barely had time to process their theories, though, because not much later, he felt a shift beside him.

Isa, having clearly lost her battle with exhaustion, had fallen asleep against his shoulder.

Her position was anything but comfortable — head lolling at an odd angle, golden hair slipping into her face, one arm awkwardly curled between them. Without thinking, Regulus reached up and gently guided her head down onto his lap, adjusting her until she was resting properly. She stirred only slightly, instinctively curling closer to him in sleep, her breath slow and steady.

Regulus glanced down. Her lips were slightly parted, undoubtedly moments away from a soft snore, her hair sprawled across his lap.

She looked vulnerable. Pretty.

A warmth spread through him, something gentle — she hadn't slept because of him. She'd been up worrying.

He let out a small snort.

Without thinking, he brushed his fingers lightly through her hair, the touch almost absentminded, soothing. Then, as if nothing had changed, he returned his focus to the conversation — pointedly ignoring the way Evan's sharp gaze lingered on him.

Isa remained like that for at least an hour before they decided it was time to head for the Great Hall for dinner.

Regulus sighed, nudging her shoulder gently. "Nott," he murmured, low enough not to startle her.

She barely stirred. No, instead, every nudge only made her shift further against him, her body curling even closer, as though instinctively seeking warmth. Regulus tried again, pressing his palm lightly against her back. Nothing. Just a sleepy murmur and another slow breath against his robes.

"She's not waking up," he muttered.

Barty smirked. "Let the girl sleep, then, Black."

"And leave her here?" Regulus frowned, glancing around the common room.

Barty shrugged. "We'll be back in less than an hour."

Regulus arched a brow. "Right. And in the meantime, God knows what kind of pranks people will pull on her."

He exhaled, shaking his head, then turned to Evan. "Come on, lend me a hand, will you?"

Evan, already amused, leaned back against the sofa. "For what?"

Regulus huffed. "Help me lift her — I'll carry her to bed."

Evan groaned. "Oh, you're actually going to carry her to your bed, aren't you?"

Regulus blinked. "Obviously. I can't enter the girls' dorm, now can I?"

Barty snickered. "The girls can levitate her, you know."

Regulus shot him a withering look. “No one is levitating Isa like a sack of potatoes, Crouch.”

Barty and Evan both sniggered, but Evan rolled his eyes and stood up. “Alright, alright,” he muttered, helping maneuver Isa until she was draped securely over Regulus’s shoulder.

With ease, Regulus adjusted his grip and carried her through the common room, ignoring a few curious glances. Isa barely stirred, quite literally snoring against him.

Inside the dorm, he moved carefully, lowering her onto his bed gently. Isa shifted slightly but didn’t wake, her body curling toward the centre of the bed automatically. Regulus knelt down, undoing the laces of her shoes before slipping them off, placing them neatly beside the bed.

He hesitated then, glancing at the deep green of her robes. He knew she hated sleeping in them — she never even lounged in her dorm in full uniform. But there was something uncomfortable about the thought of undressing her, even more so as she was unconscious.

Regulus exhaled slowly.

But he *knew* how she’d want to sleep.

With careful, gentle movements, he unfastened the clasps of her outer robe, sliding the heavy fabric from her shoulders. He had to lift her slightly to slip it off, and as he did, his fingers accidentally brushed against the bare skin of her collarbone. Isa shifted in response, a soft sigh escaping her lips, but she didn’t wake.

Perhaps it would be better if she did wake — then she could just bloody do this herself.

Regulus sighed, then turned to the buttons of her blouse. He cursed the pulse thrumming in his ears as he undid them one by one, the fabric parting to reveal the smooth, golden skin beneath.

From the doorway, he felt Evan’s gaze on him. He shifted slightly, subtly angling himself to block Evan’s view — not that it was particularly successful.

Ignoring Evan, he moved to her skirt, carefully unzipping it. He paused, checking if she was still asleep, then — wincing slightly — lifted her bum just enough to peel the material away. When he was finished, she was left in her underdress, the thin, ivory silk he knew

she'd prefer sleeping in.

Quickly, he pulled the duvet over her, tucking the blankets securely around her.

A brief silence stretched between before Evan, still leaning lazily against the doorframe, let out a quiet snort. His lips curled into a smirk. "Gonna be fun when she wakes up in your bed, mate."

Regulus snorted. "Sure. I'll deal with that later."

But Isa didn't wake — not during dinner, nor after. She slept so deeply, so peacefully, that when it was finally time for Regulus to go to bed himself, he realised there was no real choice but to crawl in beside her.

A strange sense of déjà vu settled over him as he lay down, thinking of how Isa had ended up in his bed the last time he returned from a mission.

Before settling in, he tucked the blanket around her once more, brushing a stray curl from her cheek. Then, in a quiet murmur, he whispered, "Sleep tight, Ies."

Turning his back to her, he closed his eyes, the warmth of her presence beside him lulling him into sleep.

Chapter 10: Of Hallowe'en & Snakes

Chapter Notes

> I've been a bit off the radar due to illness, but I'm on the mend — so yayy. It's also super exciting to see new readers jumping in.
>
> As always, enjoy and let me know what you think. ❤

The end of October marked the Hallowe'en weekend, bringing with it the year's first Quidditch match. Of course, as if the still very much ongoing prank war hadn't already created enough tension between the two rival Houses, the upcoming game only made matters worse.

The last week was unbearable; there wasn't a meal where he wasn't reminded by half of his House that they were 'going to smash Gryffindor', 'going to off Potter' and 'crush them all'.

In essence, Regulus appreciated the spirit among his Housemates and friends, and he knew their constant comments were meant to motivate, but, in truth, they were anything but helpful; they just made him uncomfortable and anxious. No matter how often he nodded and smiled when someone declared they would 'smash Gryffindor', 'off Potter', or 'crush them all' he knew it was, in fact, rather unlikely they would do such a thing.

For one, four of the current Gryffindor players had been on Hogwarts' last year's team, too, meaning they'd had a year of practice where others had not. Secondly, *James* was their Captain. Yes, Regulus was a capable Captain himself too — though he'd never admit how much of his strategy came from studying James the previous year — but nothing really, truly compared to James. No, no matter how much his friends tried to downplay James's talent on the pitch or his sharp, strategic mind, there was no denying the fact that James was relentless, flawless, *marvellous* in the air and with a Captain Badge. And it certainly didn't help that Slytherin's weakest link was Lively — the Keeper — especially when they were up against James and the Macmillan sisters.

No, although Regulus truly, really wanted to win, he was realistic enough to realise there'd be no 'smashing', no 'offing' and no 'crushing' — at least not for Slytherin.

Regulus was one of the first to arrive at breakfast — even the

Gryffindor team wasn't there yet. The only people pathetic enough to be this early were some seventh-year Ravenclaws and a stray Hufflepuff and Gryffindor. Regulus mechanically piled his plate with eggs and sausages, though his throat felt too dry to actually eat. He just stared at it, hoping that it would miraculously turn his meal into something appetising.

He was distracted by the sudden weight of the bench beside him. Isa plopped down next to him, looking far more awake than she had any right to be at this unholy hour.

Regulus raised an eyebrow. "You're early."

Isa shrugged. "I guess."

Silence stretched between them. Regulus made a half-hearted attempt to force down a bite of sausage, but the mere act of chewing felt impossible. After a moment, Isa sighed, stretching her arms over her head.

"You nervous?" she asked, her voice casual but knowing.

Regulus nodded, his voice hoarser than he'd intended. "Yeah, I guess."

Isa tilted her head, studying him. "What do you think?"

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

She leaned forward slightly. "Are we going to win?"

Regulus looked at her, his fork hovering mid-air. For a moment, he froze — then he let out an unguarded, loud laugh.

Isa narrowed her eyes. "What?"

Regulus raised a single eyebrow. "Have you *seen* him fly, Ies?"

Isa opened her mouth to retort, but was cut short when the Great Hall doors swung open and the Gryffindor team entered.

They walked in with their usual energy, excitement practically tangible. James and Sirius led the way, side by side, the rest of the team trailing behind them, speaking animatedly, hands gesturing as they discussed last-minute tactics.

James dropped into a seat directly across from Regulus, and Regulus could *feel* the excitement radiating from him.

Regulus pointedly shoved down the flutter in his stomach.

This was one of the most beautiful versions of James — excited, thrilled, unguarded, like a child on Christmas morning, barely able to sit still.

Their eyes met.

For a split second, the noise of the Hall seemed to fade.

James smiled. Then, with infuriating ease, tossed him a confident but private wink.

Regulus couldn't suppress the smile forming on his lips — small, fleeting, genuine, but perhaps a bit wry, too.

*****

"Alright, let's do this then — let's do this, team!" Regulus roared.

A chorus of determined nods and murmured agreements followed as the Slytherin team fell into formation behind him. They marched out of the locker room into the crisp October air, their boots crunching against the frost-kissed grass. The moment they stepped onto the pitch, the roar of the stands swallowed them whole.

A sea of green and silver erupted into cheers, banners flashing serpentine emblems against the cold sky. Across from them, red and gold blazed just as fiercely, the Gryffindor supporters chanting, their voices nearly drowning out Slytherin's. The autumn wind carried the mix of shouts and jeers through the stadium, a reminder that this was not just a game — it was *war* , the showdown. The culmination of weeks of pranks, sabotage, and mounting tension.

Regulus exhaled sharply, gripping his broom. He was about to mount when he caught sight of Miller standing stiffly nearby, her face pale, her hands clenched so tightly around her broomstick that her knuckles turned white.

“Miller,” he called, tilting his head toward a quieter spot a few feet away from the team. She hesitated before following.

They stood slightly apart, just far enough that they wouldn't be overheard.

"You alright?"

Miller nodded quickly, though her gaze darted away from his. Up close, she looked even paler, her green eyes clouded with nerves.

Regulus studied her for a moment. "Look, Miller—" She still wouldn't meet his gaze. He searched for it, finally catching her eye, seeing the fear there. "—There's a great chance we'll lose."

Miller blinked.

Regulus couldn't really blame her — surely she'd expected some kind of pep talk.

"Yes," Regulus continued, evenly. "There's a great chance we'll lose. Gryffindor's team is skilled and they have a golden Chaser trio. But don't let that take away the joy, alright?" He lowered his voice just slightly. "You're brutal on a broom, Miller. Just forget about anything else — just you and the Quaffle. Do the best you can, and don't focus on anything else."

Miller swallowed. Then, in a small voice: "They're all… they're all going to focus on me. Because they don't believe I can fly, you know."

Regulus frowned. It took him a second to put it together. She meant her Housemates.

They didn't believe she could actually fly — because she was Muggleborn. She — so talented, so skilled —had to prove she deserved her spot on the team to people who probably couldn't stay in the air for more than three seconds themselves.

How bloody absurd.

Regulus inhaled sharply, then nodded. "Alright. Don't think about that now, okay? If you fly like you did last practice…" He paused, then said with certainty, "You're the best Chaser Slytherin's seen in years, Miller."

Miller's fingers tightened around her broom, but her expression turned into something more resolute. "Alright. Yes. Thank you — Captain Black."

Regulus winced at the name.

Miller's eyes widened. "Oh — sorry, I don't know why I keep — sorry —"

Regulus stifled a laugh. “It’s alright, Miller. Let’s get up in the air.”

Before she could respond, Madame Hooch’s whistle cut through the noise.

“Teams, mount your brooms!”

Regulus exhaled, rolling his shoulders as he swung his leg over his broomstick. His gaze flicked up — Gryffindor’s team was already in the air, their scarlet robes stark against the cloudy sky. The wind howled as he kicked off the ground, soaring upwards, the stands blurring into different colours below and the roar of the crowd pressing against his ears.

James was already waiting for him at the centre of the pitch.

For a moment, it was just the two of them in the middle of the field, suspended in the air, the rest of the players hovering at a distance.

James’s expression was unusually serious as he regarded him. Then, voice steady, he said, “Our last match together, Reg.”

Regulus arched a brow. He hadn’t thought about that.

“You’re going sentimental now?”

James shot him a flat look. “What if I am, Black?”

Regulus snorted. “Good luck, James.”

James smiled, warm and kind. Regulus ignored the feeling in his stomach at the sight.

“You too, Reg.”

They reached for each other’s hands, the shake gentle, familiar — except at the last second, James leaned in, voice low, teasing against Regulus’s ear.

“I could just jump you with how hot you look, Black.”

Regulus rolled his eyes, but was unable to completely smother his laugh.

“I think that’d count as a foul,” he whispered back.

James smirked. “Willing to risk it.”

Regulus snorted but before he could come up with another retort, Madame Hooch's voice rang out—

"Mount your brooms — game on!"

And just like that, the match began.

*****

"Is this what the end of times feels like?"

"Dunno, mate. Seems rather calm. Don't they always say there's supposed to be some big battle and all that?"

"No. I think this is it."

"I can just hear Nott saying, '*It's just a game, boys'*."

"Yes. And then, '*One you're not even playing in*'."

Barty and Evan sighed in unison.

"Alright, I've got to help Eira decorate," Barty announced, sitting up with great reluctance.

"Yeah, coming," Evan muttered, dragging himself upright as well.

Regulus, however, didn't move. He lay flat on his back, staring at the canopy of his bed, arms spread out like a man accepting his fate.

"You're coming to the party, Black," Barty declared as he straightened his robes. "Don't let them take away the joy of a party too."

Regulus turned his head just enough to glance at him before exhaling. As if he had once enjoyed a common room party.

"Yeah, I'll be in a bit, alright?"

That seemed sufficient for Evan and Barty, who left without further argument, the dorm door swinging shut behind them. For a brief, blissful moment, Regulus was alone with his thoughts.

Not for long, though.

"Are you pouting?"

Regulus rolled his eyes at the sound of Isa's voice.

“No, Nott, I’m resting for the party.”

Isa snorted as she perched herself at the end of his bed. “Right.”

She took in the sight of him — the dark curls messy against the pillow, his sharp blue eyes dulled with exhaustion.

“Well,” she said, standing abruptly and shoving the standing mirror closer to the bed, “since you’re so busy *resting* , mind doing my hair?”

Regulus let out a long, pointed exhale.

“Oh, come on. No one does it better than you,” Isa moaned. “Tell me all about your pouty little thoughts while you’re at it.”

Regulus knew a lost battle when he saw one, so he sighed and sat up, holding out his hand. “Alright. Give me your wand.”

Isa handed it over with a victorious grin and, with a dramatic sigh of her own, said, "I don’t know what I want."

Regulus rolled his eyes. "Oh, brilliant. So that’s an hour of you debating between half-up or all down."

Isa shot him a sarcastic glare. "Alright, fine. Just — do something. But no braids."

Regulus nodded and got to work. No braids still left plenty of options, but he already knew what it would be. With precise flicks with both her and his wand, he coaxed her hair into glossy waves. She always looked pretty like this; with an air of effortless elegance, like she’d literally rolled out of her bed looking like one of the most stunning girls in the world.

It didn’t take long — a couple of minutes at most — before he was done and flopped back onto the bed.

Isa admired her reflection, then pulled out a small makeup bag and set to work.

Regulus watched her for a moment in the mirror. She was focused, lips pursed slightly as she applied something to her lashes, then painted her lips a deep red.

“So,” Regulus broke the silence, looking at Isa in the mirror with an amused smile, “whose heart are you conquering tonight?”

Isa snorted, but her hand stilled slightly, mid-stroke.

“What?” she asked, eyes flicking to him in the mirror.

Regulus smirked. “Well, girls only go through all this effort when they’re trying to impress some bloke, right?”

Isa let out a laugh, shaking her head. “Oh, Reg. I’ll have you know that most of the time, it’s to remind all the other girls how much prettier we are than them.”

Regulus frowned. Well, that made absolutely no sense.

He sat up slightly, watching as she dabbed more colour onto her lips. “God, I don’t know why you bother,” he sighed. “You could wear a bloody potato sack and still look a thousand times better than every girl out there.”

Isa’s hand faltered for just a second. A faint flush crept onto her cheeks.

Instantly, Regulus felt that he’d said something wrong — or at least something strange.

Fortunately, Isa broke the silence before it could settle, refocusing on her reflection.

“How about you?” she asked, her voice light but careful. “You two… still… together?”

Regulus sighed, not quite meeting her eyes.

“We were never really… together, were we?” he said.

No. In some utopian world, they would have had it all.

Regulus would dream about, just before falling asleep, when he’d force his mind to seek refuge in his safeplace, in that beautiful world that only existed in his dreams, in his imagination.

And there, they had it all, Regulus made sure of it. Still at Hogwarts, he’d take James on dates in Hogsmeade, buy him presents for his birthday, for Christmas — even on sodding Valentine’s Day, knowing how much it would mean to James.

Later, after graduation, he’d find them a house, a quiet place where he could wake up to James’s messy hair and unholy cheerful whistling

every morning. He'd fight with him over how to eat their eggs, would wrestle him out of the bathroom when he just needed a minute alone.

God, he would go down on one knee for him. He'd ask him to be his always, forever, infinitely.

But they didn't live in such a world, now, did they?

No. That world existed only in his most beautiful dreams — the most wonderful version of heaven he could think of. The place he escaped to when reality threatened to suffocate, to throttle him.

Here, in the cold, relentless reality of life, they could never really, *truly* be together, could they?

And Regulus felt it now — sure, he had heard the words, but now he *felt* them too.

I feel like I'm being eaten from the inside, Reg.

There's no way to justify this anymore.

I'm not supposed to love someone like you.

Yes, they still met twice a week in the Prefects' bathroom. And yes, James still found excuses to corner him in empty corridors, still stole glances across the Great Hall as if he *needed* to look at Regulus.

But beneath it all, Regulus could feel the shift — the slow, torturous, inevitable shift.

He felt the boiling unrest beneath James's touch, the gnawing doubt in the spaces between his words, the way something sharp and ugly was eating away at his soul.

Sometimes, when they were together, James would withdraw — just for a second, just long enough for Regulus to feel it. He'd go quiet, gaze distant, like he was somewhere else entirely. Thinking. Contemplating.

And he had known. Had known that at some point, the weight of right and wrong — of who they were supposed to be — would crush whatever love they had managed to build. That one day, James's conscience would outweigh his heart.

He was just not completely ready to be there.

Regulus just hadn't been ready for it to be *now*.

Not yet.

Regulus sighed again, tilting his back towards the canopy, ignoring Isa's lingering gaze.

"Weren't you?" she asked, barely above a whisper.

*****

Regulus hadn't expected anything different — Slytherin had lost the match. He had known it from the start, but that didn't make it sting any less.

The Gryffindor Chaser trio had been relentless, so Lively didn't stand a chance.

It was Regulus who eventually caught the Snitch, not in triumph but just to end everyone's— and especially his own — suffering.

And now they were supposed to have a combined Hallowe'en and victory party where there was no victory to claim.

Yet, despite it all, the atmosphere in the common room had transformed into the usual rowdy, carefree chaos that defined Slytherin parties.

Eira and her friends had taken charge of the preparations, determined to lift everyone's spirits — probably out of pity for Barty and his lot. As usual, an indecent amount of snacks and illegal drinks was scattered across tables and bookshelves, and two hours in, the room was alive with people dancing, drinking and laughing like they'd already forgotten about the match entirely. Which they, to some extent, probably had.

Regulus wasn't particularly in the mood.

He sat slouched in the usual corner of the common room, nursing a drink in silence.

He felt like a failure. His first match as Captain, and he'd lost. Sure, the upcoming matches against Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw would be easier, and there was no real reason to stress yet — but it was still a bitter pill to swallow.

Besides this, his mind was, as usual these days, occupied by James.

As always, Isa had picked up on it — picked up on the fact that Regulus wasn't in the mood, that something was consuming him, had been consuming him for a while now. So, yet again, Regulus found himself at a party in the common room where Isa had undoubtedly instructed all their friends to keep his mind off things.

Amaryllis and Melania had dragged him onto the dance floor multiple times, Avery and Mulciber had tried to talk him into drinking and Eira and her friends had handed him a personal plate of snacks.

Regulus had played along — he had danced, politely declined the liquor, and accepted the snacks, all solely out of politeness and out of the knowledge that a pathetic, pouting Captain didn't make for a pretty sight.

Besides, he had a responsibility to the team.

He had done his part — he'd reassured Lively about the upcoming matches, validated the Carrow twins' skills and tried to lift the spirits of the Chasers, who had just seen firsthand what a truly formidable trio looked like in the form of James and the Macmillan sisters. He'd noticed Miller standing slightly apart, pale and tense, but before he could ask her about it, Avery and Mulciber had pulled him away.

So now, finally, he was taking a moment to himself.

Regulus sighed, taking a sip of his Butterbeer. He had barely been sitting for two minutes when Barty plopped down beside him, grinning lazily.

"You're pouting, Black."

Regulus exhaled sharply. "I am *not* pouting."

Evan flopped into the seat on Regulus's other side, smirking. "Nah, you look *very* pouty."

Isa settled across from them, nodding in agreement. "Yes, *thank you*," she said airily, clearly feeling vindicated.

Barty draped an arm over the couch dramatically. "Right. We need to do something about this."

Regulus rolled his eyes, knowing his friends would not turn to try to talk him into one of two things — either to find a girl and snog her, or to find a glass of liquor and down it.

Regulus, naturally, wouldn't do either.

The real supposed solution then came as a big surprise, and was presented by Isa.

Her eyes lit up. "I have a *terrific* idea."

With a theatrical flourish, she pulled something from her pocket. Regulus squinted at it, and—

He blinked. "Nott, is that a *spliff*?"

Barty and Evan both doubled over in laughter. "*You* have *weed*?" Barty wheezed, shaking his head in disbelief.

Isa rolled her eyes. "Oh, *please*, it's nothing special. Someone confiscated it from a Hufflepuff, and now I have it. Probably not even the best stuff out there."

Barty looked positively delighted. "And *how,* exactly, would you know what the best stuff out there is?"

Isa lifted an unimpressed brow. "Oh, come on, *Crouch*. Everyone knows — the weed you take from Jamaica, the hash you take from Afghanistan. Basic knowledge."

The boys exchanged a look.

It was *not* basic knowledge.

Isa clapped her hands. "Right. Let's smoke some pot."

Barty and Evan burst out laughing again, then, still grinning like idiots, nodded enthusiastically.

Isa lit the spliff with a casual flick of her wand, taking the first hit with ease before passing it to Barty.

Barty, of course, took a deep drag and immediately choked. Sure, Barty smoked Muggle cigarettes with Isa every now and then, but they were less of an assault on the longues than weed.

He coughed violently, wheezing for air, while Evan howled with laughter, slapping his back.

"My *lungs* —" Barty rasped.

Isa, unimpressed, smirked. “Oh, you poor baby.”

Barty shoved the spliff into Evan’s hands. Evan took a hit, eyes watering instantly. He coughed, less violently than Barty, but still enough to make everyone laugh.

Then, inevitably, Evan turned to Regulus, holding it out with a lazy grin.

Regulus scoffed, pushing his hand away. “Absolutely not.”

Three pairs of eyes narrowed at him.

“Party pooper,” they chorused.

Regulus exhaled through his nose, shaking his head as the scent curled around him. He coughed. “I need a drink,” he muttered, pushing himself up from the couch.

He gave Isa a pointed look, then flicked his gaze to Barty and Evan.

“Take care of her, alright?”

Isa snorted. “Oh, please. I should be the one making sure they don’t do something idiotic.”

Regulus rolled his eyes and left them to it, weaving through the crowd toward the drinks.

He grabbed a Butterbeer from the nearest table and popped a handful of crisps into his mouth, absently scanning the dance floor. Avery and Mulciber were twirling some of Eira’s friends around, some fifth-years were snogging in the shadows near the fireplace and Melania and Amaryllis were whispering together, giggling over something.

As his gaze swept over the crowd, it landed on a lone figure curled up on one of the couches by the fire.

Miller.

Her dark hair was loose now, falling over her shoulders and partially hiding her face. What little he could see — her downcast green eyes, the way they flickered toward the fire without really seeing it — made his stomach tighten. She looked sad, small.

Regulus frowned. Miller was a terrific Chaser, and beyond that, she just seemed like a nice person. It didn’t feel right for her to be sitting

here, isolated, while the rest of the house drank and danced like the loss had never happened.

Without overthinking it, he grabbed another drink and strode over, dropping onto the couch beside her.

Miller's head snapped up immediately, her eyes widening slightly as she registered that her captain had joined her on the couch.

"Here." He held out the Butterbeer.

She hesitated. Then, as if unsure this was really happening, she reached out, fingers brushing his as she took it.

Regulus leaned back, studying her.

"What's up, Miller? Why so tragic?"

She exhaled softly, a faint blush creeping up her cheeks as she met his gaze. Then she returned her gaze to the fire. "We lost, didn't we?"

Regulus shrugged. "So? Everyone's still dancing and laughing."

Miller stayed silent, turning the Butterbeer slowly in her hands.

Regulus watched her, noting the way she curled in on herself, debating whether to speak or keep it bottled up.

"What, Miller?" he pressed. "What is it?"

She exhaled.

"I think…" Her voice was quiet. "I think they blame me. For not winning the match."

Regulus blinked. His head tilted slightly, brow furrowing. "What?"

Miller kept her gaze low, focused on the floor now, the light of the fire flickering in her eyes. "I just… I think they don't like me. And… they blame… *me*."

"That's inane," Regulus countered, shaking his head. "Miller, you're the *only* reason we didn't completely fall apart out there. You played like hell today."

She let out a small, humourless laugh. "Yeah. But I think they just don't…" Her grip tightened slightly around the bottle. "…like

someone… like me."

Ah, then it clicked.

People were shutting her out because she was a Mudblood.

Regulus felt something hot and sharp curl in his chest.

"That's absurd," he breathed.

Miller looked up at him, startled — yet not nearly as startled as she was when Regulus suddenly stood and nodded toward the dance floor.

"Dance with me, Miller."

She blinked. "What?"

He extended a hand. "Come on. Let's have some fun."

Truth be told, Regulus didn't find much fun in dancing himself, but he knew that girls always liked it and he could hardly think of something else that could cheer her up. Besides, he was painfully aware of his status in Slytherin, so perhaps if people saw her with Regulus Black, they would get off her back.

Miller, however, didn't look so sure.

"Come on. They can stick their thoughts in their arses. There hasn't been a better Chaser in Slytherin for years, Miller. Let's celebrate that."

Miller hesitated and she inhaled, slow and uncertain. Then — cautiously, carefully — she reached out. Her hand slipped into his, hesitant at first, and he could feel how cold her fingers were, how unsure she was about this whole thing. She followed him anyway, and as soon as they stepped onto the dancefloor, people noticed.

Eyes flicked toward them, side-glances and hushed whispers. Miller tensed, her fingers almost pulling away, her shoulders rising defensively.

Regulus just gripped her hand tighter.

He turned toward her, giving her a pointed look. "Ignore them," he said. Then, with a smirk, "I know it's hard because *everyone* always stares at me—"

That got a small, surprised huff of laughter from her.

“See?” he said, smiling. “There you go. That’s the spirit.”

Miller rolled her eyes, but he could see it now — the way her shoulders loosened just a little.

He led her into the music, starting with something simple, swaying to the rhythm, letting her ease into it. At first, she was stiff, awkward, self-conscious. But Regulus kept moving — he kept it light, throwing in a few absolutely ridiculous spins, just exaggerated enough to be stupid and make her laugh.

And it worked. Slowly, she started to let go.

Her movements became more fluid, her hesitation melting away. And then, finally — she was smiling.

Regulus smirked.

“See?” he said over the music. “You can have fun.”

Miller rolled her eyes, but she was still smiling.

They danced for quite some time after that. They laughed surprisingly easily and at one point, Miller was dancing just as ridiculously as Regulus, throwing in her own absurd twirls and making him actually laugh out loud.

Eventually, though, Regulus grew tired.

He ran a hand through his hair, breathless. “I need a drink,” he announced.

Miller, still catching her breath, nodded. “Go on, then.”

Avery and Mulciber intercepted him on the way to the drinks table, each of them already holding half-full glasses. “Nice moves,” Avery remarked, nudging him with his elbow.

Regulus snorted, reaching for a Butterbeer. “Sure.”

He turned back to Miller, holding up a bottle. “You want one?”

Miller hesitated, her gaze flicking between him and the others. There was a hint of something in her eyes — intimidation, maybe, or just exhaustion from the night. She shook her head. “I think I’ll… head for

the dorm." Then, softer, "But — thank you. For everything."

Regulus leaned back against the table, popping the cap off his Butterbeer. Avery and Mulciber flanked him, drinking lazily, when Barty and Evan suddenly appeared, looking far too amused.

Barty wedged himself between Regulus and Avery, throwing an arm around Regulus's shoulders with a broad grin.

"Black," he drawled, swaying slightly. "What was that?"

Regulus sighed. "What was what?"

Evan smirked. "Dancing with Miller?"

Barty wiggled his eyebrows. "Is our dear Captain developing a thing for little Miller?"

Regulus shot him a flat look. "Crouch, I am nearly an adult. She's like… thirteen."

Barty shrugged. "Shouldn't have to stop you."

Regulus froze, looking at him incredulously.

Of all the reasons — and, truth be told, there were plenty — why he would *never* do a thing with Miller, that might actually be the most crucial one.

"That's sick, Crouch."

Barty just patted his shoulder. "Joking, Black."

Regulus exhaled sharply, glancing between them. Something about the glazed look in their eyes, the way Evan was absently tracing shapes on the tabletop—

"How high are you?"

Barty grinned. "*Very*."

Evan exhaled slowly, looking at the ceiling like it was the most fascinating thing in the world. "Isa has some *good* shit."

Regulus snorted.

*****

As was unfortunately often the case, Regulus found himself very sober around people who were very intoxicated.

Barty, Evan, and Isa were howling with laughter at absolutely nothing, Avery and Mulciber were swaying, clinging to each other as they bellowed some off-key tune, and Eira and her friends had reached an unbearable level of giggling.

So, at some point, he just… fled.

Now, sprawled out on his bed, arms and legs stretched out like a starfish, he let out a deep, exhausted sigh, debating whether this was just a temporary escape or if he was calling it a night entirely.

And then—

"Well, well, well. Running from your own party, Black?"

Regulus *nearly* levitated off the bed. In a flash, he had his wand out, heart hammering as he whipped around toward the voice.

James was smirking at him, leaning *far* too comfortably against Evan's bed, the Invisibility Cloak slipping off his shoulders.

Regulus seethed. "How many times have I told you, *James*, not to fucking *do that*?"

James, utterly unbothered, just laughed — hard, too.

And then, because Regulus apparently wasn't allowed peace tonight, the air beside James shifted — Lupin materialised slowly from under the cloak, looking vaguely apologetic, though also faintly amused.

Regulus exhaled sharply, throwing his wand onto his nightstand. "Oh, what a pleasant surprise," he deadpanned. "The Gryffindor Head Boy *and* Prefect sneaking into my dorm."

James had the nerve to flop onto Evan's bed, stretching out like he owned the place. "Shouldn't you be downstairs with your mourning housemates?"

Regulus snorted. "What, drowning my sorrows? No, I knew where we stood immediately. My Keeper against you three? We didn't stand a chance."

James's face, unexpectedly, broke into a warm, sincere smile. "You were good, though. Your flying was brilliant, Reg. Absolutely

brilliant."

Regulus felt his stomach do a weird flip and instinctively smiled back before *immediately* realising Lupin was there too. He schooled his expression back into unimpressed neutrality.

Lupin, meanwhile, had started surveying the dorm, his sharp eyes taking in the absolute disaster surrounding them — clothes tossed over chairs, textbooks and empty Butterbeer bottles littering the floor and Crabbe's tie hanging from the bedpost like some sort of decoration.

All except for Regulus's corner, of course. His bed was crisp, his trunk neatly shut, everything meticulously arranged like Mother had practically terrorised him into making a habit of it.

Lupin huffed a quiet laugh. "Well, *one* of you is clean."

Regulus looked at him, expression blank. "Ah, yes. With this lunatic —" he said, his eyes flicking to James, "—and my brother, I'm sure you spend half your time cleaning up your dorm."

James looked affronted. "Oi, what is *that* supposed to mean?"

Lupin's response was dry. "He's saying you're a slob, Prongs."

James turned to Regulus, scandalised. "That is *blatantly untrue*."

Regulus just raised an eyebrow.

James faltered. "Okay, *mildly* untrue."

Lupin chuckled, but Regulus, rolling his eyes, decided to get to the actual point.

"Back to things that actually matter — what *are* the Gryffindor Head Boy and Prefect doing in my dorm?"

Before either of them could answer, the door suddenly burst open.

Regulus tensed immediately, every nerve on high alert. *Oh no—*

He sighed in relief at the sight of Isa.

She paused, blinking at the scene of James lounging on Evan's bed, Lupin standing awkwardly nearby, and Regulus looking a strange mix of confused and annoyed.

Regulus, taking absolutely no chances, flicked his wand. The door slammed shut and locked with a sharp click.

Isa's eyes went *huge*. Then, after a long pause, she said, *very* seriously:

"Is this… actually happening or is this just because I'm high?"

Lupin and James exchanged a glance. Then they both turned to Regulus, the wonder clear in their eyes — was Isadora Nott actually high?

Regulus ignored James and Lupin, and instead turned to Isa. "No, Nott, this is, *sadly*, truly happening."

Isa turned to James, pinning him under one of her fierce glares. "What you doin' here?"

James's tone immediately cooled. "I could ask you the same, Nott. I'm visiting Reg. Jealous?"

Isa blinked at him. It then became clear that weed turned Isa very unfiltered and *very* blunt. "I sleep here sometimes," she shot back, dipping her hip challengingly. "Jealous?"

Lupin turned to Regulus, the pain clear on his face. "Oh no," he whispered. "Are they always like this?"

Regulus rubbed his temples. "Oh, you should be glad you're not in our Potions class."

Lupin watched Isa and James bicker, eyes widening. "Oh yes. *Very* glad."

Regulus sighed, remembering, *again*, that James and Lupin were still in his dorm, and that Isa was there now too. He turned back to them, exasperated. "But *really*, what the hell are you all doing here?"

Before Lupin could answer, James's gaze flicked to Isa's hair. "Your hair looks good," he said, almost absentmindedly.

It was truly absurd how these two could go from bickering to normal — almost friendly, even — in less than a second.

Isa beamed, running a hand through it. "Oh yeah — Reg did it."

Regulus flinched.

James and Lupin snapped their heads toward him.

Isa, oblivious, continued, “Oh yeah, you didn’t know? Reg is *brilliant* with hair. The things he pulls off with my sisters—”

James huffed out a laugh, then turned to Regulus with a distinct gleam in his eyes. “And *you* were surprised about your sexuality?”

Regulus froze. Then, very slowly, his gaze raked over him, torn between the very conflicting urges to laugh and punch him in the face.

Lupin looked like he wasn’t sure whether to intervene.

Isa, completely high, continued to be utterly oblivious.

Regulus exhaled sharply. “Again, people — what the hell are you all doing here?”

Isa, blinking blearily, admitted with a deep sigh, “I have no bloody clue.”

James and Lupin exchanged a glance — brief, fleeting, but telling enough for Regulus to piece it together.

“Oh no — *not* another prank.”

James grinned, sheepish but smug.

Regulus sighed, deep and suffering. “Okay. What is it?” His mind flicked, unbidden, to exactly two years ago and the pranks they had pulled then. He realised that, also back then, James had snuck into his dorm. “The decorations again?”

James gave him a mock-wounded look. “No.”

Regulus arched a brow.

James hesitated, then sighed. “Well — yes. That too. But it’s not the main act. Just get there and you’ll see.”

Regulus snorted. “Ha. And become part of your prank willingly and knowingly? I do have self-respect, James.”

James smirked. “But you’ll miss the show — I’m really fond of this one.”

Isa, still visibly high, waved a lazy hand. “God, you take this stuff way too seriously. What if you put all that time and effort into something else, like… I don’t know… your career?”

James, unfazed, shot back, “I’ll have you know my career is just fine, Nott. We’re just very skilled prankers on the side.”

Isa rolled her eyes dramatically, clearly past caring.

James clapped his hands together. “Alright, well, Moony and I want to have a look as the party starts, so we’ll be off now.”

Isa squinted at him. “How are you going to go? How are you going to slip through a common room full of Slytherins unnoticed?”

James froze, clearly unprepared for that very valid question, then turned to Regulus with a look that could only be described as mild panic.

Regulus, unbothered, whispered, “She’s high as a kite. Just don’t answer and get under the cloak.”

James blinked, then nodded. “Okay, but you — go check from the stairs, alright?”

Regulus sighed, but deep down, he felt oddly endeared by James’s enthusiasm.

Idiot.

James rose from the bed, moving closer to Regulus. He leaned in slightly. “It was nice, what you did for Miller,” he murmured, low enough for only Regulus to hear.

Regulus stiffened slightly, turning to face him fully. He arched a brow. “Don’t tell me you’ve been spying on me the entire evening.”

James snorted. “I can’t be completely blamed for wanting to look at you.”

The words hung between them just a tad too long. Regulus felt the warmth of James’s breath on his skin, caught the faint scent of him — woodsy, something cosy. It was ridiculous how close he was, how time seemed to still—

Then reality snapped back into focus.

Isa was still there. Lupin was still there.

James averted his gaze quickly, a slight blush creeping up his cheeks. That, somehow, made Regulus feel even warmer.

Lupin looked at the scene with mild curiosity, but Isa didn't seem to have noticed it all.

James gestured for Lupin to follow. Regulus flicked his wand to unlock the door, subtly distracting Isa while James and Lupin slipped under the cloak.

Just before disappearing, James turned back. One last look, one last smile.

Then he was gone.

Regulus sighed, turning to Isa. "Come on. Let's check the common room from here."

They stood at the staircase, watching the party unfold below.

Amaryllis and Melania were spinning in the middle of the room, laughing, while Barty and Evan swayed off-beat and slow, visibly far gone. Avery and Mulciber clinked their glasses and downed them while a group of fifth-years danced ridiculously at the dancefloor.

Honestly, it didn't look strange at all.

Until it did.

With a sudden, violent burst of magic, the banners overhead shifted — green melting into red, silver twisting into gold. Gryffindor colours were found in every inch of the common room, confetti exploding through the air in bold, brilliant showers of scarlet and gold.

A massive banner draped from the ceiling, emblazoned with a single, taunting phrase:

THE TRUE KINGS OF THE CASTLE.

And then the room stilled.

Two enormous snakes slithered through the entrance, their scaled bodies gleaming under the flickering green lanterns.

Then — pure, utter chaos.

Shrieks echoed through the room. Students scrambled, knocked over tables, drinks spilling everywhere, sheer panic taking over.

And yet—

Evan and Barty remained completely unbothered.

Instead of running like all the sane people did, they staggered toward the snakes, squinting at them curiously.

Isa inhaled sharply. “No — Crouch, Rosier — don’t pet it!”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “Relax, Ies. It’s definitely an illusion.”

Sure enough, the snakes shimmered faintly, their outline flickering in and out like a mirage.

But the damage was already done.

The common room had emptied in record time, students retreating in frantic, shrieking waves. Tables had overturned, drinks had been abandoned, confetti stuck to the floor in clumps.

It was complete, utter havoc.

Regulus let out an exasperated snort, shaking his head despite himself.

It must’ve taken the four of them a considerable amount of effort to pull this off — to sneak into the common room undetected, to get their hands on the decorations, to get the illusion magic just right.

And somehow, against his will, it amused him — the stupidity of it, the innocence of it.

Leaning against the doorframe, he watched as Evan and Barty — completely undeterred — continued standing before the illusioned snakes.

Evan frowned slightly. “Why did everyone leave?”

Barty nodded solemnly. “Yes, mate. Snakes are so unappreciated. Look how cute this one is.”

Isa, standing beside Regulus, burst into laughter.

“Absolutely, Barty,” Evan continued, patting the illusion like it was a pet. “This one’s adorable.”

Regulus turned to Isa, both of them dissolving into laughter.

At least the prank had made him laugh.

He exhaled, gaze sweeping across the room one last time.

The absurdity of it all — the loss of the match, James appearing in his dorm again, the two enormous snakes chasing Slytherins out of their own common room…

It would be marked as one of the last of those memories, as one of the last of those fond recollections before the metaphorical shit hit the fan. Before everything changed.

Chapter 11: Of Soirées & Brothers

Chapter Notes

A new chapter for the weekend. Mind the warnings!

Have a lovely weekend and let me know what you think. ❤

It was late November when, indeed, the metaphorical shit well and truly hit the fan.

Tensions in the magical world had been simmering for weeks, steadily mounting with every new report in *The Daily Prophet*. The incidents themselves were minor — at least, individually — but there were plenty of them. Raids on hidden properties, attacks on estates, investigations into Knockturn Alley shops, and at least eight Muggle deaths — collateral damage in duels they had no part in. Some of these events dominated the Prophet's pages, covered in exhaustive detail while others were barely acknowledged, reduced to a passing mention. Still, Regulus caught them all, scouring every article meticulously each morning, cutting out the relevant pieces, and collecting them without really knowing why.

The tension was palpable between the walls of Hogwarts, too. The ongoing pranks between Slytherin and Gryffindor had taken on a meaner edge, earning the usual perpetrators — Barty, Evan, Mulciber and Avery — an almost permanent slot in detention. James, Sirius, and Pettigrew weren't much better off, and more often than not, they all served their punishments together, which only resulted in further misconduct, which, in turn, led to even more detentions. It was just one big self-sustaining cycle of stupidity.

The nastiness and tensions weren't confined to Regulus's friends — or Sirius's — but were expressed by students from all houses from all years. Not a day went by without someone jinxing someone in the corridors and every other day, someone ended up in the Hospital Wing.

Meanwhile, of course, the Mudbloods were back to moving in packs, wary of what might happen if they didn't. The only ones who seemed utterly indifferent to their own safety were Evans and Miller.

Now, Miller, at least, had some protection. Regulus had made a habit of sitting with her in the common room while they worked on

assignments — this way he ensured people left her alone and, truth be told, she actually made pleasant company. There was something unfiltered and refreshing about her which Regulus really appreciated. Under his watch, no one would touch her, and besides, she was a Slytherin; House pride was apparently important enough to scale down the cruelty toward the only Slytherin Mudblood to the occasional taunt.

Evans, however, was another story.

Yes, she was the Head Girl, but the title did hardly shield her. To be frank, instead of providing her immunity it was bound to make matters worse — at least where Barty was concerned. It was clear that he took personal offense to the idea of being under her authority as a Prefect. And of course there was her situation with Severus, which had earned her the personal wrath of Mulciber and Avery.

So, when Regulus saw her walking all alone to Slughorn's soirée that evening, he didn't think it was bold.

He thought it was stupid.

Sure, Regulus had long since understood that Gryffindors in general had a remarkable disregard for their own safety, but this was bordering on self-sabotage.

Regulus, too, was alone. All his friends who had been invited were in detention again, and Isa had sworn off Slughorn's soirées entirely after her breakup with Davies. Yes, Davies wasn't even at Hogwarts anymore, but apparently, she'd come to the belated realisation that she didn't care much for Slughorn's parties in the first place. Regulus could hardly blame her — he hated their Head of House's boundless enthusiasm, his gratingly cheerful demeanour and all the stupid guests he invited, but well, he didn't really have a choice. He had to stay close to Slughorn as ordered by the Dark Lord, so every invitation was in reality an obligation.

So, alone and already dreading the evening ahead, he was making his way to Slughorn's office when he caught sight of the Head Girl in the corridor.

She froze at the sight of him — her eyes a mix of wary and uncomfortable, her red hair framing her face and shoulders.

Regulus didn't quite know how to act in the presence of the Mudblood who he had, strangely so, given a ride and whom he spent every

Monday evening with in the Potions classroom, but well — with several other people. Now they were alone.

He settled for a curt nod.

“Evans.”

Her response was just as stiff.

“Black.”

Regulus glanced around the corridor. It was eerily empty.

She was *truly* stupid, wandering around the corridors alone these days.

She was the golden target. A Gryffindor. The *Gryffindor* Head Girl. Severus’s ex…. whatever. Oh, Avery, Mulciber and Barty would be all too happy to make an example of her.

And it wasn’t as if Regulus hadn’t already warned her during the last Slug Club gathering they’d both attended alone. Although, truth be told, Evans had hardly taken it as a genuine warning and more as a covert threat.

From the look in her eyes, Evans was clearly thinking about this too.

“Are you going to threaten me again for walking around alone?”

Regulus tilted his head slightly, arching a brow.

“I’ll have you know that wasn’t a threat, but a *warning*, Evans.”

She raised a sceptical brow. “Right. Well, I’ll be fine. Besides, you’re alone too.”

Regulus knew this was hardly the same. He was immune to the prank wars and nasty inter-House jinxes in a way no one else could claim. No one from his own House would dare turn their wand on him, no one from the older Gryffindors would strike him — Regulus was sure due to some agreement between Sirius and the rest — and well, the other Houses steered clear as well, him being the Black Heir and Captain of Slytherin.

No, it was really not the same.

Regulus decided there was no point in arguing and simply kept

walking, Evans trailing a few paces behind. And then, both of them rivalling each other in sheer awkwardness, they stepped into Slughorn's office together.

"Ahh! *Miss Evans!* And *Mr. Black!* "

Slughorn's voice boomed across the room, brimming with delight. The air smelled of cinnamon and spiced wine and platters of canapés hovered lazily above the table. The familiar long, elegantly set dining table stood at the centre of the room. It was still empty, with the invited students just hovering in small groups across the office.

"My, my, what a *marvellous* sight to see two such brilliant young minds arriving *together!*" Slughorn beamed, gesturing grandly between them. "Gryffindor and Slytherin — ah, a true testament to the power of unity! Dumbledore would be thrilled to see it, you know."

Regulus and Evans shot each other equally unimpressed glances.

Then, Evans turned to Slughorn and forced a tight-lipped smile. "We just happened to arrive at the same time, Professor."

"Ahh, modest as always, Lily, yes, yes, I know! And you, Regulus, my boy — always so composed, so distinguished. A true Black *!* " Slughorn chuckled, clapping him on the shoulder with entirely too much enthusiasm.

Regulus mustered every self restraint in his body not to step away.

"And oh," Slughorn went on, eyes twinkling as he surveyed them both. "What an *excellent* pair of protégés you two make! Top of your year, both of you! *Such* potential. You know, I wouldn't be surprised if, in a few years' time, I were reading about your dazzling careers in the Prophet!"

Regulus maintained a perfectly neutral expression. Evans, to her credit, only blinked.

Slughorn beamed at them, entirely oblivious to their mutual discomfort. "Yes, yes! A brilliant future ahead for you both, I have no doubt! But enough of my rambling — go on, *mingle!* Have a drink, enjoy the evening! Plenty of delightful company to be had, plenty of fascinating conversations to be joined!" He clapped them each on the shoulder before bustling off toward two seventh-year Hufflepuffs entering behind them, already launching into another grand speech.

Regulus and Evans exchanged another stiff, awkward nod and, without another word, they parted ways.

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The evening was as dreadful as ever. Without the other Slytherins, the gathering was uncharacteristically small. The only attendees were a handful of Ravenclaws, among whom their Captain, Taylor from Defence with a friend and a few Hufflepuffs, none of whom Regulus particularly knew — or cared to know, for that matter.

After what felt like an eternity of excruciatingly forced socialising, Regulus did his best to fade into the background, drink in hand, blending into the wallpaper. He found himself comfortable, observing, only speaking when absolutely necessary — which, fortunately, wasn't required often, as Slughorn was too caught up in his own boundless enthusiasm to really notice Regulus dissolving into the wall.

But, as always, there came a point where escape was no longer an option and they were all forced to sit at the table and be subjected to the familiar grand and tortuous presentation of the evening's guest.

"Ah, we are *especially* fortunate tonight!" Slughorn announced, eyes gleaming as he gestured toward the newest arrival. "Everyone, everyone *,* allow me the pleasure of introducing none other than *Christopher Maddock!* A man of *immense* talent and great *stature* in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement!"

Regulus recognised the man, of course, him being a direct colleague of Mr. Crouch.

God, it was a good thing Barty wasn't here. Regulus let out a quiet sigh of relief at the thought — as insufferable as this evening already was, it would've been far worse with Barty in the same room as a continuous reminder of his father.

A quick glance across the table revealed that Evans recognised the man too. Unsurprisingly, she didn't look particularly thrilled to see him — he had an inkling what Evans's political stances were, and he was quite positive they wouldn't align with Minchum's nothing-going-on-policies.

Regulus barely registered Slughorn launching into a long, self-indulgent tale about Maddock's illustrious years at Hogwarts and, more importantly, his oh so wonderful relationship with Slughorn himself, because, frankly, Regulus was too exhausted to care.

With his nights plagued by nightmares, his lethal schedule, a mountain of assignments, Quidditch practice three times a week and the extra Potions class on Mondays, he found it difficult to feel particularly joyed about surrendering an evening to Slughorn and Maddock when he could've been finishing his work — or, even better, dozing off while Isa's nails scraped against his scalp.

"And so!" Slughorn declared, practically vibrating with excitement. "Does anyone have any questions for Mr. Maddock?"

One of the Hufflepuff girls, a seventh-year named Abbott, leaned forward eagerly. "Sir, how is the Ministry ensuring that international trade relations remain stable during these times?"

Regulus exhaled slowly through his nose.

Of *all* the possible questions to ask — about the war, the attacks, the unrest — *international trade* was what she chose to go with?

Apparently his unimpressed glare didn't go unnoticed, as Evans shot him a quick glance, biting her lip to keep from laughing.

Maddock cleared his throat, shifting slightly in his chair. "Ah, well, of course, stabilising trade is always a priority, even in turbulent times," he said, choosing his words carefully. "The Ministry remains in constant communication with our international partners, ensuring that no disruptions—"

And, of course, it was a Gryffindor who dared to interject one of the highest-ranking officials in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Annoyingly proud and daft though they may be, Gryffindors did make for good entertainment.

"And what about the current tensions, Mr. Maddock?" Taylor asked. "How is the Ministry handling *that*?"

Maddock straightened, the discomfort creeping into his expression. "Ah, yes, well, as you all know, Minister Minchum's administration is dedicated to maintaining order and stability. Measures are in place to ensure the safety of all citizens, and I can assure you, the situation is well under control. The Auror Office is working tirelessly, and we have every confidence that these… *incidents* will be dealt with swiftly."

Evans let out a quiet breath. “Oh yes, *not much* is going on — barring the fact that there were at least three raids last week, an entire estate burned down, several shopkeepers in Knockturn Alley were ‘investigated’ and never seen again, and — oh, let’s not forget — eight Muggles died in crossfire.”

Regulus settled back in his chair, smirking. Oh yes, he could watch this unfold for hours. Preferably with snacks.

Slughorn gave a jolly, nervous chuckle. “Ah, Miss Evans! Always so astute, so very… *engaged* in current affairs—”

Maddock smiled tightly, waving a hand dismissively. “Miss Evans, I understand that these reports can seem alarming, but I assure you, the Ministry is doing everything in its power to—”

“To pretend none of it is happening?” Evans said lightly, tilting her head.

Regulus snorted, amusement glittering in his eyes.

Maddock let out a short, clipped laugh. “To *manage* the situation, Miss Evans. There’s no need for unnecessary panic.”

Evans didn’t press further, but her expression made it clear she wasn’t convinced.

Luckily, Taylor picked up where she left off, probably emboldened by her audacity. “Then, sir, what would you say to the people who *are* panicking?”

Maddock hesitated for a fraction of a second.

Evans seized the moment. “I think, Daniel,” she said, turning to Taylor but keeping her gaze sharp on Maddock, “the more pressing question is *why* the Ministry continues to act as though nothing is happening. Why it refuses to acknowledge that it’s failing to guarantee safety. That instead of pretending things are fine, it should start actually *doing* something about it.”

Silence.

Maddock’s polite smile faltered, just slightly.

Regulus took a slow sip of his drink.

He took back his earlier thoughts — this was *definitely* worth

surrendering an hour or two of his evening for.

Maddock's smile remained, but it thinned at the edges. "Miss Evans," he said smoothly, "you must understand that governing is a delicate balance. Instilling too much fear leads to chaos. The Ministry's priority is to maintain order, and that means handling these matters with discretion rather than unnecessary alarm."

Evans let out a short, incredulous breath. "Discretion?" she echoed, tilting her head. "Right, of course. Wouldn't want people getting too concerned about the disappearances and murders. That might make the Ministry look bad."

Regulus nearly choked on his drink. *Merlin*, she was bold.

Maddock's jaw tightened slightly, but before he could formulate a response, Slughorn gave another hearty, nervous chuckle and clapped his hands together. "Ah, Miss Evans, ever the firebrand! Such passion, such conviction! A quality I've seen in many of my most *brilliant* former students, yes indeed!" He turned back to Maddock with a forced, jovial air. "But of course, of course, we mustn't weigh the evening down with too serious a discussion! These are heavy times, yes, but that is all the more reason to enjoy a good evening among friends, wouldn't you say?"

Evans looked deeply unimpressed. She exhaled sharply through her nose, lips pressed into a thin line, before glancing across the table—

Right into Regulus's gaze.

He arched a brow, the corners of his mouth twitching despite himself.

Evans narrowed her eyes at him, but he could see the flicker of amusement underneath her frustration.

He didn't bother stifling his laugh.

The soirée dragged on, filled with idle small talk, self-praise and the usual nonsense. Another half hour passed before they were, regrettably, forced to mingle. Taylor and a Ravenclaw quickly seized Maddock's attention, launching into an animated discussion. Regulus, unwilling to suffer through either Maddock's pretentious platitudes or Slughorn's overzealous praise, made a beeline for a Butterbeer and returned to his favoured spot against the wall.

A familiar sense of inevitability settled over him as Evans joined him

at some point, standing nearby but keeping a respectful distance.

Regulus cast her a sidelong glance, amused.

“You’re really trying to get yourself uninvited from the next soirée, aren’t you?”

Evans snorted. “Oh, I think if it actually bothered him, he would’ve stopped inviting me a long time ago.”

Silence stretched between them, but it was oddly… unstrained.

Regulus let his gaze drift back over the room, watching Maddock gesturing grandly as he spoke.

Then—

“So…” Evans turned her head toward him, caught between stifling a laugh and genuine curiosity. “Been driving any cars lately?”

Regulus shot her a flat look. “No. How about you?”

She let out another quiet snort. “Sorry, it was just so… unexpected.” Then, with an easy shrug: “And no, I don’t know how to drive.”

Regulus arched a brow. “Now, *that’s* weird.”

Evans snorted. “Ah, you sound like Petunia — my sister. She also thinks it’s weird that I can’t drive.”

Regulus nodded absentmindedly, trying to recall whether he’d ever come across another student with the surname Evans.

She must have caught the flicker of thought in his expression. “She… she’s never been to Hogwarts. She’s a Muggle.”

Regulus clearly noted the slight stiffness in her tone. She was evidently uncomfortable talking about her Muggle sister.

He nodded, just as stiffly. “That must be…” He searched for the right words, unsure how to smooth over the tension. “...hard.”

He immediately flinched at his awkwardness.

Evans shrugged. “Well, yeah. For her, I guess. We’re not really… on good terms. I think it’s because, you know, her being a Muggle, me being a witch…”

Regulus let out a quiet snort. “I can relate. And my brother’s a wizard too. So, believe me, it doesn’t have to be because of that.”

Evans fell silent for a moment. So did Regulus.

Oddly enough, he found he didn’t mind standing there with her, saying nothing at all.

Together, they watched Maddock continue his performance with Slughorn at the centre of the room.

After a beat, Evans exhaled, almost to herself. “The world’s changing,” she murmured. “Maybe everyone should just try to hold on to whoever they can.”

Regulus tilted his head slightly, considering her words.

He said nothing.

*****

Although Regulus was clever enough to know for himself that the world was, indeed, changing, the truth of Evans’s words was underscored less than two days later — when the castle was jolted by the news brought by the *Daily Prophet* to its breaking-news subscribers.

He was sitting at dinner with the usual group of sixth- and seventh-years, tuning out the hum of conversation around him. The long table was cluttered with half-finished plates and goblets of pumpkin juice, but Regulus didn’t really register anything beyond his Charms book which lay open in his lap.

Then, a flurry of wings cut through the buzz.

Several owls swooped into the Great Hall. It wasn’t the usual mail delivery — that was during breakfast — which could only mean one thing: breaking news. Those who subscribed to the Prophet’s Breaking News dispatches immediately straightened, eyes tracking the incoming birds.

Regulus barely had time to react before a sleek tawny owl landed in front of him, ruffling its feathers impatiently. He blinked once, then instinctively reached for his pocket, only to remember he hadn’t brought any coins to dinner.

“Anyone got some money?” he asked.

Barty immediately fished through his robes and then shoved a few Sickles into Regulus’s palm. Regulus deposited them into the owl’s pouch, leaving the bird to take off just as swiftly as it had arrived.

Unfurling the paper, he barely had a moment to register the bold, inky headline before Isa, seated beside him, let out a sharp gasp. He felt Barty and Evan leaning in, reading over him.

Dark Mark Cast Over Diagon Alley as Death Eaters Strike

by Elara Fawley, Senior Correspondent

Monday afternoon turned to chaos as a devastating attack rocked Diagon Alley, leaving at least eight dead and many more wounded. Witnesses reported spells flying indiscriminately as masked assailants — presumed to be Death Eaters — unleashed destruction upon the heart of Britain’s wizarding commerce. Moments after the attack began, the Dark Mark was cast high above Gringotts, sending waves of terror throughout the wizarding world.

Eyewitnesses described scenes of horror as storefronts were reduced to rubble and the air filled with screams. “One moment, I was buying potion ingredients, the next, people were running for their lives,” said Madam Primrose Claggett, who narrowly escaped the blast that destroyed the front of Flourish and Blotts. “They didn’t care who they hit. It was slaughter.”

The attack, which lasted approximately fifteen minutes before the attackers Disapparated, has left the wizarding community shaken. Among the victims were two Aurors who attempted to intervene, as well as several shopkeepers and passersby. St. Mungo’s has reported an influx of critically wounded patients, with Healers working tirelessly to stabilise those injured in the ambush.

This atrocity intensifies scrutiny on Minister for Magic Harold Minchum’s administration, which has thus far abstained from declaring an official state of war against the Death Eaters. Critics argue that this restraint has emboldened the Dark Lord’s followers. Edgar Andrews of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement voiced the sentiments of many: “How many more attacks must we endure before acknowledging the war at our doorstep? The enemy shows no hesitation; neither should we.”

As fear tightens its grip on our society, the urgency for decisive action

mounts. Monday's assault serves as a grim reminder that no corner of our world remains untouched by the shadow of darkness.

For a comprehensive list of victims and personal accounts from survivors, turn to page 3. For an in-depth analysis of the Ministry's potential responses, see page 5.

The moment the paper hit the table, the Great Hall exploded into sound.

Everywhere, students craned over shoulders, sharing copies of the Prophet, whispers rising into full-blown conversations. The Gryffindor table was, unsurprisingly, loudest — someone slammed a hand against the wood, and a voice rang out, livid and unfiltered.

"This is *terrorism!*"

Near the middle of their table, Sirius shot up, half-standing over the bench. "Well, what do you know! Maybe now the Ministry will actually *do something* instead of sitting on their—"

"Mister Black, *sit down*," McGonagall's sharp voice cut through the noise.

At the Slytherin table, the reaction was more subdued, but no less rattled. The girls were huddled together, whispering in hushed, urgent tones. Amaryllis reached for the paper with a slight frown.

"Page three," she instructed, scanning the article. "We should check if it concerns someone we know."

Regulus barely heard her, his mind racing immediately.

Was it really them?

Well yes, sure it was — the Dark Mark betrayed as much. Although Minchum had dismissed the presence of the Dark Mark as evidence of Death Eater involvement regarding the attack on Legot's estate, Regulus knew better.

It didn't mean the article was trustworthy, though — that, too, had been proven by the Legot attack. The news coverage had been erroneous *and* had failed to raise so many crucial questions. Merlin knew how much of this report was skewed — or outright untrue.

That didn't change the most important question, though — *why*?

Was it, as Mr. Nott had explained during their last fieldwork, a move to sow chaos, to force people to turn against the administration? But then… why an attack like this?

Had they been watching someone? Something? Had the Aurors arrived unexpectedly, forcing a confrontation?

Regulus was so deep in thought that the commotion in the Great Hall barely registered. What he *did* register, though, were the two pairs of burning eyes — one grey like his, one hazel — fixed on him from the Slytherin table.

He didn't look up, determined not to meet their gazes. Instead, he flicked his Prophet toward the girls so they could read it properly and returned his focus to his plate.

Yes, the world was changing.

*****

Although one could argue that a Death Eater attack in Diagon Alley on a random Monday afternoon — leaving eight people dead — was, in fact, the very definition of shit hitting the fan, Regulus found himself thinking that it wasn't the attack itself, but the Potions class scheduled that same evening that truly marked the moment *shit hit the fan* .

He had seen Sirius's demeanour during dinner, and he made no pretenses — his brother was going to be extremely difficult.

Until now, everyone had upheld the unspoken agreement of avoiding sensitive topics, maintaining the fragile, uneasy truce between the three Gryffindors and three Slytherins in their shared Potions lessons.

But there was too much tangled history between them — too many frayed, intersecting lines just waiting to snap. If one domino fell, if one thing set someone off, it would definitely trigger a full-scale catastrophe.

There was Sirius and Regulus. So many twisted things had happened throughout their youth together that Regulus couldn't even decipher it, couldn't even pinpoint where it had gone wrong. The years of abuse, the pain inflicted by the very people meant to protect them. Mother. Father. Their governor. The people who were supposed to have been their guardians, their protectors, preparing them for the

outside world from within a bubble of safety and warmth. Instead, they had been subjected to a cruelty within the walls of their own home, cruelties that would put the deepest circle of hell to shame.

And well, something like that either forged people together or drove them apart. And apparently, it had been driving them apart all along — but slowly, quietly, without either of them even noticing.

Sirius had always been the rebellious one. The outspoken one. The one who wore his heart, his emotions, his ideals on his sleeve. As a child, it had been relatively harmless — ruffling his hair after Mother had painstakingly tamed it, sneaking sugar quills before dinner, whispering jokes at the family table. But as he grew older, the rebellion turned sharper. He questioned things — loudly and relentlessly. Squib Rights, blood purity, the laws their parents insisted were absolute, the necessity of all the dinners, all the gatherings. And the more Mother realised he was losing her favourite son, the more relentless she became, eventually pushing Sirius only further away.

God, yes, Regulus understood perfectly. Understood perfectly that James had given Sirius everything he had been denied, all the things he had always craved for — easy laughter, a home warm in so many more important ways than temperature, parents who loved unconditionally. Sirius had definitely entered a world he had known had existed, but had filled so voids inside him. Because all a child ever wanted was to be loved, right? And well, Euphemia Potter's love was limitless.

Sirius's loyalty to them had definitely been rebellion, a way to push back against everything he had been raised to believe. And then he must have fallen for it.

It had resonated. Because Sirius had always wanted to stand up to the wrongs of the world. To resist.

But why couldn't he just accept that the world was the world, that it was what it was?

And why couldn't he understand that not everyone could fight back? And why couldn't he understand that there was no resistance left in Regulus in the first place? Why couldn't he understand that the years of pain, of shame, of quiet, insidious abuse had crushed all his willpower, all his strength, all his power to stand up for anything at all?

For years, he couldn't stand up for himself. How was he to stand up

for the world, if he couldn't even do it for himself?

Regulus hadn't resented Sirius for leaving. He had known it was inevitable from the moment his brother returned home for Christmas in his first year at Hogwarts. But if Regulus didn't resent him for leaving, why did Sirius resent him for staying? Wasn't that unfair?

And yet, he knew Sirius missed him. It was in the way he still bantered with him, still sought him out. And Regulus — well, he wouldn't acknowledge it, not openly, barely even in his own mind, but of course, he missed him too.

They had been brothers. They had been in almost all of it together. It had been them against the world.

But perhaps for Regulus it was easier, easier because he had lived with so many lies for years. Because he had hidden part of himself for years. Had hidden the version of him, the version he was forced to be at the hands of their governor. Perhaps there had always been a wedge between him and Sirius, but without Sirius knowing it. Perhaps that made it easier for Regulus to step away.

Because he could. He could ignore it, the sting, the hollowness, the ache of absence at the thought of losing his brother. Yes, mourning the dead was terrible. But there was something inexplicable about mourning the living.

"Look Reg, now it's February, and we're finally out there together. Look at the sky!"

"You're my best friend, Reggie. My bestest friend."

But he could ignore it, push it away, shove it into the box that belonged to another life. To another version of himself. And he had learned to live with the fact that only in the deepest, most buried part of himself — only surfacing in the deepest depths of his dreams — his brother still reached for him, still smiled at him, still told him that he might be the brightest star in the sky, but his little brother was the brightest on earth.

And then there was James. Wonderful, wholesome James. Without a doubt the love of his life. The love of the life he wasn't allowed to live. He had fallen for him so hard, so completely, that he was sure he had surrendered part of his soul. That he carried it now, unknowingly, as a birthmark somewhere on his body. So familiar you could hardly still see it, but infinitely there.

The way James lit up Regulus's heart when he smiled, the limitless, genuine acts of kindness, the quiet determination to navigate Regulus to places he had never been before without pushing, always checking in, always respecting his boundaries.

Regulus knew that James had healed part of him. That without him, he'd never come to accept his body, never come to accept what he could do with it, what others could do with it. That without him, he'd never have come to fully grasp how lust and love do not contradict, but can instead coexist, even strengthen each other.

James had taught him that.

Had shown him, with infinite patience and boundless gentleness, all the ways to experience pleasure. All the ways he could give pleasure without fear, without coercion.

James had taught him so many things Regulus was sure he'd never understand. Had soothed him when the memories had clawed their way in, had shown him that, despite the obstacles, they could continue their quest. And he had always been gentle, always been kind, always so respectful — effortlessly, too. James had no idea how much of Regulus's soul he had stitched back together.

But, of course, there was also Isa. Isa, his best friend. Isa, who could read him as easily as a well-worn map, sometimes tracing his roads before he even knew where they led.

Isa, who understood all the aspects of his life. Understood his life at home. Understood all the workings of their world, the burden of being the Heir to the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black. The only one of his friends who knew about Regulus and James. But also the only one, besides James, who knew Regulus intimately. Who had seen all of him, who had, like James, felt him inside her, whispering soft, caressing words until the pleasure became so profound he was simply lost for words.

Isa, who he was expected to build a future with.

And they would all be there, in that Potions class — all the lines, all the connections, all the balances. All the dominoes, waiting to fall.

"You okay, Reg?"

Isa's voice snapped him back to reality.

“Yeah, of course,” Regulus answered immediately, ignoring the sharp, knowing look she shot him as they walked toward the Potions classroom.

They were the last to enter, and Regulus felt the thick tension in the room at once. Amaryllis and Evans were exchanging quiet, if slightly stiff, small talk while Sirius and James flipped absentmindedly through their Potions book. The second Regulus and Isa crossed the threshold, James and Sirius’s heads snapped up.

Regulus looked at James first — he met Regulus’s gaze with a small, private smile, but the unmistakable wryness didn’t go unnoticed. Regulus quickly averted his gaze and let it settle on his brother. If he hadn’t spent his childhood under Mother’s icy glares — glares capable of turning even the most tropical forest to frost — a shiver might’ve gone down his spine.

Regulus suppressed the urge to roll his eyes.

Of course Sirius would blame him for all the wrongs in the world. Of course Sirius would hold him personally accountable for an attack in Diagon Alley he had nothing to do with. Sirius, like Mother, always needed someone to blame, always needed a villain to point to — a clear, tangible enemy to lash out at when things felt too big, too overwhelming.

How typical.

In silence, Isa and Regulus took their seats at the shared table, opening their books without a word. Regulus was too distracted by Sirius’s glare and James’s glances to properly focus. He barely even noticed Slughorn’s instructions until the Professor swept out of the room, leaving them alone with the cauldron and the clear hostility in the air. Only then did Regulus realise they’d been assigned to brew a Draught of Living Death.

A fitting choice, really.

They collected their ingredients in near silence — the only sounds breaking the stiffness in the room were the low murmurs exchanged between James and Sirius, and the continued stupid smalltalk between Amaryllis and Evans.

They were in the process of slicing their valerian roots when Amaryllis — whether out of curiosity or sheer social suicide — ventured into dangerous waters.

"Awful, isn't it? What happened in Diagon Alley," she mused, her voice tinged with disbelief and unease.

Isa nodded slightly.

Evans exhaled, shaking her head. "Yeah. I was shocked. It's terrifying to think about."

Across the table, Sirius let out a humourless laugh. "Shocked?" he echoed, his tone edged with something dark. "Can't say I am."

Regulus didn't look up, his hands steady as he pointedly focused on crushing a bezoar. He knew exactly what Sirius was doing. He was so much like Mother in that way — riling people up, prodding, pushing, needling his way into an argument. Because Sirius couldn't just sit with his anger, couldn't let himself feel it — he had to make everyone else feel it too.

No one said anything, but Regulus noticed how everyone went rigid.

"*You* shouldn't be shocked, at least," Sirius continued, his voice almost casual, but not quite. "You should be used to it by now, yeah? I reckon you lot are preparing a celebration in the dungeons?"

Amaryllis stiffened, the mortar in her hands grinding a little too forcefully against the pestle. "Oh, for Merlin's sake, Sirius," she snapped. "Being in Slytherin doesn't make us Death Eaters."

Regulus pushed away the intrusive thought that there was a very high chance Amaryllis's father had been directly involved in the attack.

Of course Sirius wasn't done quite yet. He turned his head slightly, his gaze sliding to Regulus, waiting, provoking. "Oh, sure. Not all Slytherins support this, obviously. But I imagine plenty do."

Regulus kept his eyes down, methodically slicing his roots into perfect, even strips. He *wanted* to lash out — really, *badly*. But he refused to give Sirius the satisfaction. So he stayed silent, cool, detached.

"Come on, Padfoot," James muttered under his breath, nudging Sirius's arm. "Let's just make the potion, yeah?"

But Sirius wasn't interested in potions. His fingers tightened around his knife, his knuckles white. "He's not even denying it."

Regulus's head snapped up. He decided that responding coldly, measuredly, would give himself the satisfaction of a retort — but wouldn't give Sirius the satisfaction of knowing he had gotten to him.

"Why the hell should I have to distance myself from that attack?"

Sirius's eyes flashed, cold and accusing. "Because it's your people, isn't it?" he shot back. "Your ideology, your precious pureblood supremacy. Don't tell me you're not looking forward to joining them the moment you graduate."

Regulus let out a short, humourless snort at the irony. If Sirius only knew that the walls of Hogwarts hardly confined him. That he had been part of the Revolution for over a year now. That he bore the Mark on his skin for the rest of his life…

But before he could open his mouth, Isa cut in, clearly afraid of the bomb about to explode. "Alright," she said, her voice firm. "That's enough."

James was clearly on the same page. He straightened, placing a calming hand on Sirius's arm. "Seriously, Padfoot. Let it go."

Regulus and Sirius didn't hear them — as a matter of fact, they only had eyes for each other.

Both rose to their feet, standing toe to toe, the rest of the classroom fading into nothingness. They didn't hear James's quiet warning, didn't hear Isa's firm voice asking them to reason, didn't hear the sharp intake of breath from Evans or the anxious shift of Amaryllis.

The walls of Hogwarts might as well have dissolved around them. There was no Slughorn, no classmates, no cauldron bubbling with a half-brewed potion. Just the two of them, locked in an icy standoff.

"How have you become this way?" Sirius demanded, voice rough, incredulous, like he couldn't believe the person standing in front of him. "How can you stand for their bigotry, their hatred of Muggles—"

Regulus's expression was ice, but inside, his blood burned.

The same fucking card. Every time.

The Muggle-hate card.

It was never about hating Muggles. Why couldn't they understand

that? Why had they fallen for all the propaganda, all the oversimplifications?

“It’s not about hatred for Muggles,” Regulus snapped.

Sirius’s voice rose, nearly a shout now. "Of course it’s about hatred for Muggles! How can you pretend it isn’t?"

"But it’s not!" Regulus snapped, the fury spilling through despite himself. "Just because your small mind can’t fathom—”

Sirius cut him off, stepping closer, grey eyes burning.

And then—

He pulled a card worse than the Muggle card.

Well. If Sirius’s goal was to rile him up, mission *fucking* accomplished.

"Just because he was a Muggleborn doesn’t mean all Muggleborns are bad!"

The effect was immediate. There was no mistaking whom Sirius was referring to.

Regulus felt the blood drain from his face, his heart hammering so violently he could feel it in his throat. His fingers curled into fists at his sides, but he couldn’t stop the trembling in his hands.

His world narrowed further.

He stepped closer — so close their foreheads nearly touched.

A perfect mirror.

The same piercing grey eyes. The same sharp cheekbones. The same dark curls, only Sirius’s were wild and unkempt, while Regulus’s were sleek, controlled. Control was slipping, slipping fast.

Without thinking, Regulus drew his wand.

Sirius mirrored the motion in an instant, his own wand pressing lightly against Regulus’s chest just as Regulus’s pressed against his.

Neither of them blinked.

Neither of them heard the sharp, collective gasps from the others.

Regulus's voice was low, dangerous. "How dare you?" His fingers tightened around his wand. "How dare you bring him into this conversation?"

Something flickered across Sirius's face — like he hadn't expected Regulus's coldness, his voice sharper than the finest cutting hex. It was an emotion Regulus couldn't place, but it was gone in an instant, replaced by something harder. Sharper.

"That's it?" Although Regulus almost whispered, the complete, utter silence in the room ensured that everyone heard him, loud and clear. "You think that's it? That he's the reason for my hate for Muggles and Mudbloods?"

"Ha!" Sirius shouted, startling the people around him. "So you admit it — you hate them!"

Regulus bared his teeth in something that was neither a snarl nor a smile. "My *supposed* hate." His voice dripped with venom. "And you know what? He wasn't even a Mudblood."

Sirius faltered. His brows drew together. "What?"

Regulus tilted his head, voice eerily soft. "He was a fucking Pureblood, Sirius."

Sirius's grip on his wand tightened. He looked almost uncertain now, like the ground beneath him had shifted. "A blood traitor," Regulus continued, "yes. But a Pureblood nonetheless."

Sirius swallowed, struggling to process everything. "What did they do to him?" he asked, almost hesitant.

Normally, Regulus wouldn't have answered. Wouldn't have given his brother the satisfaction. Sirius had chosen to turn his back on him, so he had no right to demand answers now. He couldn't have it both ways, after all.

Yet, it was as if the mention of the governor had crumbled all sensibility, shattering all restraint. The world around them blurred, narrowing to the sight of Sirius only. Sirius, his brother, his wand pressed against his chest, his breath ghosting over Regulus's skin, his grey eyes, so much like Regulus's own, boring into him, unrelenting.

Regulus tilted his head.

"They butchered him like an animal."

Isa flinched.

James inhaled sharply, as though punched in the gut.

Evans and Amaryllis looked frozen in place, completely lost, yet visibly shaken.

Not that Regulus noticed.

Regulus's voice remained cold, detached. On the inside, though, his stomach twisted at the memory of the picture. Of the image burned into his brain forever.

"They tortured him," he continued, his words sharp, precise, deadly. "Slit his throat. Hung him upside down. Left him to bleed out."

Sirius winced, recoiling like the words had physically hit him.

Regulus delivered them without emotion, but inside, he could feel the rage curling like a viper beneath his ribs. He could still see it — the blood pooled below, his eyes wide with sheer horror, his crotch…

Regulus suppressed the shudder threatening to betray him.

Sirius's voice was barely above a whisper. "You have to distance yourself from them."

Regulus let out a short, mirthless laugh. "I don't have to do a bloody thing, *brother*."

Sirius's face twisted. "Oh god, they have you in their grasp, don't they?"

The silence that followed was suffocating.

Regulus could hear his own heartbeat, fast and insistent.

Rage overtook him — spreading from his gut, his heart, seeping into every pore, every fibre of his being.

It left him speechless.

It was Sirius who continued. His voice was quieter this time, but no less damning. "God," he repeated, like he was realising it in real-time. "They *have* you, don't they?"

Still, Regulus remained silent, the anger consuming him, his heart hammering in his chest in a dangerous, explosive rhythm.

Oh, how he wanted to punch him. How he wanted to give him only a fraction, only the smallest portion of the pain he felt. The pain he felt at the thought, the memory of *him* . The man he had both loved and hated with whole his heart.

Sirius's voice was barely above a whisper. "What did she do?" His hands trembled slightly. "Cissy. What did she do to have you?"

Regulus took a step back, a sneer curling on his lips.

There was a way. One way to make Sirius feel, to make Sirius pay.

Regulus knew exactly what would make his elder brother hurt most.

"Well, believe it or not, Sirius," he said, voice dripping with something cold and unrelenting, "but Cissy has been more of a sibling to me than you ever have."

The reaction was immediate.

Sirius flinched, his breath hitching as if the words had physically struck him.

"That's not true," he muttered, shaking his head. "Take it back."

Regulus didn't waver. "No. " His eyes were sharp, merciless. "She's meant more to me. Done more for me in the aftermath than you've done in all these years."

Sirius's hurt twisted into something raw, something furious. His hands clenched into fists.

Oh, this felt good. This felt *good.*

Regulus twisted the knife deeper.

"Where were you, Sirius? What did you do, what did you mean to me after Bellatrix did what she did?"

Sirius shook his head violently. "No." His voice cracked with something ugly. "Fuck you, Reg. I was a child."

Regulus let out a bitter laugh, eyes flashing. "I was a child too." His voice trembled now, but it only made him speak harsher, faster. "And

yet I had to go through all of that — all of that shit no child should ever go through. But not you, right, Sirius?" His lip curled. "You were perfectly fine. Being cuddled and coddled by our dear Mother. And now you're here?" He let out a sharp, humourless breath. "Now you're here, teaching me a lesson about standing up? Dictating me about right and wrong?"

Sirius fell silent.

A silence so thick it drowned out the shallow breaths of the others. A silence that stretched and stretched until it was unbearable.

Isa and James — the only ones who truly knew what the brothers were talking about — exchanged a look of pure panic.

Regulus tilted his head, victorious and venomous. "Yeah." His voice was soft, mocking. "That's what I thought."

Silence again.

"You're a hypocrite, Sirius," Regulus hissed, his words honed to cut deep. "A fucking hypocrite."

It was Sirius who moved first and it was Regulus who reacted instantly.

The wands hit the floor, forgotten, as they lunged at each other, fists colliding, hands grabbing, pushing, shoving.

Regulus was consumed with hate. There was nothing on his mind, nothing left but his unrelenting will, his burning desire to let Sirius *feel*.

Only a portion. A portion of the pain he had been forced to feel for years. A portion of the shame of the thought that very deep down, a part of him wished it hadn't been him, but his brother instead. The guilt of ever daring to think such a thing. The utter guilt at the thought of only remotely wishing his fate upon anyone.

So he punched. He pulled. He struck.

And Sirius shoved back, wild and unrestrained.

God, they truly took after their parents. They also forgot their wands as soon as they got in a physical fight — especially after a couple of drinks — like a pair of Muggles.

In a different situation, Regulus might have laughed at this.

The onlookers snapped out of their frozen horror all at once.

"STOP THIS!" Isa's voice rang out, her hands immediately grabbing at Regulus's shoulder, trying to pull him back.

James was there too, trying to shove Sirius away, but neither of them were listening.

"Get off each other, for fuck's sake—"

"*Fuck OFF!*" Sirius and Regulus shouted at the same time, turning in perfect unison to shove James and Isa away.

The two stumbled back, eyes wide, stunned by the ferocity of their voices.

And the fight resumed.

The fight resumed — brutal, uncoordinated — a desperate, furious clash of fists and elbows, fueled by years of resentment, not for each other but for the lives they had endured, yet forced by circumstance, finding its target in the other. Years of bitterness spilled over, like blood from an open wound.

Sirius landed a blow against Regulus's jaw — his knuckles cracked on impact — but Regulus barely felt it before surging forward again, tackling him, sending them crashing into a desk.

A hand tangled in Sirius's robes, a punch thrown wildly, neither of them knowing or caring if they hurt or got hurt.

Regulus gasped as Sirius grabbed his arm, twisting it back, but he wrenched himself free, slamming Sirius against the desk instead.

And then—

A pause.

Their chests heaved.

Regulus, straddling Sirius, his fists clenched, ready to strike again—

But he stopped.

Sirius's eyes weren't furious anymore.

No rage. No fire.

They were filled with something else.

Ache.

Something too deep, too raw.

Regulus froze, his grip slackening, breath still uneven.

That is when he stood abruptly, grabbing his wand from the floor with shaking fingers.

Sirius stayed there, unmoving.

He didn't stop him. He didn't say a word.

Regulus didn't look at anyone else. Didn't acknowledge the stunned expressions of Evans and Amaryllis, the way James had his hand half-outstretched like he wanted to stop him but didn't know how. Didn't acknowledge Isa's sharp inhale of breath as she stepped toward him.

He didn't look back.

He just turned and walked out of the classroom.

*****

Regulus stormed through corridors, his pace quick, furious, his boots echoing in the dungeon's stone passageways.

A storm of emotions battered him, crashing over one another— anger, frustration, guilt. And beneath it all, a bone-deep ache.

Sadness about Sirius. About what they had once been. Once best friends, once everything. And now fighting like a pair of Muggles in a fucking Potions classroom.

The memory made him flinch.

Too many people had been there. Too many had seen.

Amaryllis… Evans… Isa… *James*.

And James and Isa — they had understood. Had understood everything they had said. Every single word.

Guilt gnawed at him — guilt over sharing so many things with so many people around. Guilt over sharing that sickening truth that had slipped from his mouth in the heat of his rage. The thought that he had buried deep, so deep down. The thought that now lay bare for everyone to see. The thought that some part of him had wanted — *had wished* — it had been Sirius instead.

Regulus felt like he was going to be sick.

He didn't know what to do with all of it. Didn't know how to name it, where to put it, what to do with the way his chest ached and his hands shook.

So he turned it into anger instead. Into cold, blood-burning fury . He let it consume him, let it swallow every other feeling whole, let it coil tight in his stomach, ready to strike.

Behind him, he heard Isa's hurried footsteps, quick and determined. She was following him.

He clenched his jaw and walked faster.

The moment he pushed through the entrance of the Slytherin common room, a sharp pause fell over the usual murmur of conversation.

In their usual corner, Evan and Barty turned toward him instantly. Evan shot Barty a quick, alarmed glance before rising from his seat.

"Reg—" Evan started, his eyes scanning everything; the dishevelled hair, the busted lip, the fresh bruise darkening his jaw. His tight, swollen fist.

Regulus ignored him. Instead, he strode toward the dormitory stairs, his muscles coiled, praying — *praying* — the dorm would be empty. If Crabbe and Selwyn were there and so much as breathed wrong in his direction, he was sure he'd pummel them into the ground.

Isa followed close behind, and when Barty made a move to follow as well, she shot him a firm, wordless look, ordering him to stay.

Barty hesitated — then slowly sat back down.

Regulus shoved the dormitory door open, exhaling sharply in relief at the sight of the empty room.

Good.

He needed to be alone. He needed to do… *something*.

His body betrayed him. He just couldn't stay still.

He paced — furiously, relentlessly, dragging his hands through his curls, his breath heaving in his chest.

His skin burned with the memory of Sirius's fists, his mind spun with everything that had been said.

Behind him, the door clicked shut, then locked.

He turned sharply, finding Isa standing against it. She didn't speak, didn't press, didn't demand.

She just watched him — saw him. It unsettled him, how her brown eyes, dark with concern, travelled over him, making their way right into his pained soul.

Regulus swallowed and kept pacing. His fingers curled and uncurled restlessly. He looked at his hands.

Oh, he knew exactly what he wanted to do with them.

He wanted to punch something. He wanted to *kill* something.

He wanted to wrap his hands around someone's throat and squeeze. Feel their pulse stutter. Watch as the light faded from their fucking eyes—

He let out a sharp breath and shoved his hands over his face, pressing hard into his temples, trying — failing— to breathe.

Isa stepped closer.

"Could you please leave." His voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper.

Isa shook her head, steady, unmoving. "Absolutely not."

"Just—" His breath hitched. "Just leave, Ies."

"No."

A pause.

She tilted her head slightly. "We're doing this together."

Regulus let out a hollow, humourless laugh. “What exactly are we doing together?”

Isa exhaled. “I don’t know.” Her voice softened. “What do you want to do?”

“I want to *kill* him.” His breathing was heavy, unsteady. “I’m going to *KILL* him.”

Isa took another step forward, reaching for his wrists.

The moment she touched him, he winced. She noticed.

“You can kill him tomorrow,” she whispered. “Right now, you’re getting in your pyjamas.”

Regulus blinked.

“…What?”

Isa gave a small, almost amused smile, but her eyes were still wry, still sad.

“Come to bed with me.”

Regulus froze. His brain stuttered, caught on her words.

Isa, realising exactly how that had sounded, groaned.

“I mean — not like that — I just—” She stuttered, then collected herself with a small huff. “C’mon, Reg. Just lie here with me for a bit. Give me your curls.”

His hands shook. His throat was tight. He took a deep breath.

“Just—” He swallowed hard, grabbing his clothes. “Just give me a bloody minute.”

Inside the bathroom, he barely recognised himself in the mirror. His curls were a mess, wild and tangled from his brother’s rough hands. For a long moment, he simply stared at his split lip, the dark bruise along his jaw, the raw, scraped knuckles.

Then, with sharp, mechanical movements, he stripped off his clothes and pulled on his pyjama top. He ran the faucet, splashing cold water on his face, the sting oddly pleasant. He quickly turned to some quick healing spells, enough to take the edge off the bruising, enough to

prevent curious stares at breakfast the next morning.

When he stepped back into the dorm, Isa had settled into his bed, half-sitting against the headboard, legs folded beneath her. She had stripped down to her underdress, though she still wore her skirt, the fabric bunched around her legs.

Regulus exhaled, feeling strangely empty as he crossed the room.

He didn't speak as he crawled onto the bed and just let himself collapse onto his side, his head settling into her lap. With a flick of her wand, she unlocked the door and with another, she drew the curtains shut.

Isa didn't say anything either. She simply reached for him, fingers slipping into his hair, nails scratching gently at his scalp — slow, steady, just right.

And somehow, it worked. Like always, she knew exactly what he needed. The tension in his shoulders ebbed, the rapid thoughts slowed. Bit by bit, breath by breath, he let himself be pulled under the rhythm of her touch.

The words, the shouts, the flying punches — he could push them all away. He could smother the image of Sirius's shock, the ache in his own chest.

The only thing he couldn't completely smother, the one thing that refused to be pushed to the periphery of his being, was James's eyes.

James's eyes, tinged with sadness, with compassion. But also with resignation.

And Regulus knew. Knew exactly what was coming.

They would see each other tomorrow, after practice. And he was completely, painfully aware of what was going to happen.

The inevitable.

Chapter 12: Of Inevitability & Knots

Chapter Notes

> Lots of love for everyone commenting and leaving kudos. You make my day. ❤

The next day, Regulus skipped breakfast, arriving just in time for his first class. Isa had tried to drag him to the Great Hall in the morning, but he had refused — refused to sit at a table with Amaryllis and feel the burning stares of Sirius, James and Evans.

Fuck. They had seen too much, heard too much. He was never going to recover from this.

He didn't show up for lunch either and took it in the Kitchens instead. Still, as dinner approached, Regulus realised he couldn't keep hiding forever. Perhaps the best way forward was to pretend nothing had happened, that nothing had gotten to him. And well, to sell that illusion, he most certainly couldn't stay away from meals all day.

Not that he was looking forward to it, though.

So, when he found Miller in the common room, hunched over her Transfiguration textbook and flipping through the pages with visible frustration, he reasoned that dinner could wait a little longer. Miller scribbled furiously on her parchment, her quill practically stabbing the paper.

Regulus stopped by her table, leaning against its edge. "You alright, Miller?"

She startled slightly, her green eyes flicking up to meet his. A hint of shyness crossed her face before she nodded. "Yes, Captain."

His lips twitched. "What are you working on?"

"Transfiguration," she admitted, casting a frustrated glance at her notes. "I — I think I get the theory, but somehow, I just can't get it to work."

Regulus glanced around the room, spotting Evan and Barty on the other side. He had successfully avoided them all day — not sharing a word despite sitting through the same classes — and though he *knew* he couldn't do so forever, postponing it a bit longer was more than

appealing.

Exhaling quietly, he pulled out the chair across from Miller and sat down.

“When’s it due?”

She groaned. “Tomorrow afternoon.”

“Well,” he said, rolling his wand between his fingers, “how about I teach you the practical part? That way, you’ll have the rest of the night after practice to focus on the essay.”

Miller’s eyes lit up, though she hesitated. “Don’t you want to go to dinner?”

“Dinner can wait for a bit,” he said easily. “I don’t think we’ll need long.”

And he was right. Miller only needed a little over fifteen minutes to get the spell right.

When they finally left the common room, heading toward the Great Hall together, Regulus kept his pace even, his hands tucked into his robes. As they entered, he deliberately avoided looking at the Gryffindor table, keeping his focus ahead.

At the entrance to the Slytherin table, Miller glanced up at him. “Thanks, Captain.”

He inclined his head. “Anytime.”

She peeled off to join her two friends, while Regulus slid into his usual seat with his friends.

An uncomfortable silence stretched across the table.

He didn’t blame them. He must have looked rough yesterday, and by now, they surely knew he had gotten into a fight with Sirius. Isa was discreet and wouldn’t tell a soul, but he was certain Amaryllis had shared something. Probably not too much — unless she wanted to face Isa’s wrath — but she wouldn’t have stayed completely silent.

Luckily, his friends knew better than to pry — especially when it came to familial issues — so after a small silence, during which Regulus pointedly ignored the gaze of Amaryllis, Barty and Evan resumed their conversation — their voices a little too exaggerated, a little too forced.

*****

He stretched practice as long as he could without risking curfew. He lingered in the locker room as long as he could. He walked back to the castle as slowly as possible. Every step was heavy, thick with the dread that had settled over him since seeing that look on James's face.

Every step slow. Echoing. Agonising.

But no matter how much he postponed it, eventually, he reached the Prefects' bathroom.

He stood at the entrance, waiting — listening for the soft, careful footsteps. For the familiar, tentative presence of James behind him, hidden beneath the cloak. For the gentle tug at his robes as Regulus stepped inside.

And there it was — a hesitant pace, slow but sure. Regulus exhaled shakily the moment he felt James's hands on his waist, his fingers pressing lightly into the fabric. Then they were moving together, slipping inside the room like they had done so many times before.

Regulus stilled just past the entrance. Closed his eyes. Braced himself for what was to come.

A lump lodged itself in his throat.

Then, torturously slow, James slipped off the cloak and moved.

When Regulus opened his eyes, James was looking right at him. Their gazes locked — an entire history woven between them in one glance.

The sadness in James's eyes hit him like a blow to the chest.

Silence.

James took a step closer, then another, until he was right in front of Regulus, his hands reaching up to cup his face. His thumb traced the faint trace of the bruise along Regulus's jaw, gentle but searching, and Regulus let his eyes flutter shut at the touch.

James's hands. His beautiful, strong Chaser's hands. Hands that had held Regulus so many times. Hands that had caressed every part of his body. That had known how to be firm, how to be tender.

James exhaled. "It looks good," he murmured. "Did you get rid of all the bruises?"

Regulus nodded.

James did the same, his hand slipping away, falling uselessly to his sides.

More silence.

Then, carefully — almost too carefully — James said, “Would you want to… talk to him?”

Regulus sighed.

“I don’t think it would change anything.”

James hesitated. “I think it would. I think you just need to… communicate. I think if you’d talked—”

“I think,” Regulus interrupted, his voice firmer than before but not unkind, “that it’s better if you stay out of this, James. And no, it wouldn’t change a thing.”

Something sad flashed across James’s eyes. “Why not?”

Regulus swallowed, meeting his gaze. “For the same reason you’re here.”

James flinched. His eyes fluttered shut, his throat bobbing as he swallowed back his sorrow.

Regulus could hear the slow, steady beating of his own heart. Could feel the dryness in his throat, the way his hands trembled despite himself.

James still said nothing.

And then — suddenly, without warning — James broke.

The first sob was barely audible, just a sharp inhale, but then another followed, and another, and before Regulus could even think, James was crying. His shoulders shook, his breath hitching, hands clenching and unclenching at his sides.

Regulus hated it. Hated seeing James — wonderful, always-bright, always-cheerful James — like this. It was wrong. It was a crime against nature.

James Potter should not be crying.

Regulus stepped forward and pulled James in.

James buried his face in Regulus's shoulder, his fingers twisting into the fabric of his Quidditch jersey. Regulus didn't cry — he felt close to it, the burn in his throat unbearable — but he only held James tighter, rocking him slightly, his hands threading into his hair.

Oh. His hair.

His beautiful, thick, unruly hair.

How he was going to miss this. Miss seeing it up close, miss the feeling of it between his fingers, miss the scent of it — cedarwood and a hint of something warm.

Regulus pressed his lips together, inhaling deep, shushing him softly. Slowly, he guided them down, sliding to the floor, James curled against his chest.

"C'mon," Regulus murmured. "It'll be alright. Shhh now, Jame."

The name slipped out before he even registered it.

James stiffened. Regulus froze.

Then James pulled back, blinking up at him, eyes red-rimmed and glassy. "Jame?" His voice cracked on it.

Silence.

Then — another sob, another broken inhale. James pressed his forehead against Regulus's, eyes squeezing shut.

"Two years," he choked out. "Two years, and when we're ending it, you come up with this — this beautiful pet name?"

Jame.

Not Potter. Not Prongs. Not Jamie, like his mum called him. Just Jame.

His. A name only Regulus would ever use. A quiet, intimate claim on something he was about to lose.

James let out another quiet sob, curling back into him, and Regulus held him close — so close, just holding onto this, onto him, a little longer.

And so they sat there, James crying into his chest, Regulus rocking him gently, stroking his hair over and over, tracing the curve of his cheek, pulling him impossibly closer.

Fighting his own tears as he memorised everything.

The feeling of James in his arms. The sound of his breath. The warmth of his body. The scent of his hair.

Drinking him in for the last, last time.

*****

They stayed like that for a while, but at some point, James had gotten up — reluctant, hesitant, wiping at his eyes — and left.

Regulus had stayed behind. He had sunk into the bath, sinking deeper and deeper into the water, the lead in his throat so heavy he thought that he might drown under its weight. He wondered whether he would fight it.

And now, he was walking back to the dungeons, his steps slow, his limbs heavy, his mind a hollow, echoing thing, a bone-deep sorrow settling over him.

Yes, it was inevitable. Yes, he had known it was coming. Yes, it was better that it happened now.

But it hurt. It stung like salt in an open wound. It lodged itself like a knife between his ribs. It hollowed out something vital inside him.

Another living person to mourn.

Another cruel variation of grieving the living.

Unexpectedly, Regulus ran into Barty on his Prefect round. He was paired up with Lupin, and neither of them looked particularly thrilled about it. They kept as much distance as possible, exchanging cold glares.

Barty looked up first, smirking. “You know it’s past curfew, Black?”

Regulus snorted, but the sound was empty. “What, Crouch, you gonna deduct points?”

Barty’s smirk remained, but his sharp gaze raked over Regulus, taking him in, catching something beneath Reg’s demeanour.

He stepped closer, throwing a quick glance at Lupin from the corner of his eye before lowering his voice. “You alright, Reg?”

Regulus forced a smile. “Yeah, of course. I’ll see you in the dorm in a bit, alright?”

Barty nodded, though his eyes lingered, unconvinced.

Regulus walked past them without another word, ignoring Lupin, ignoring his gaze — his knowing, infuriatingly perceptive gaze.

It was a lie, though. Regulus never saw him in the dorm.

He entered the common room eventually, instantly feeling Isa’s eyes on him. He didn’t meet them. He ignored everyone — kept his head down, numb, moving on autopilot as he changed into his pyjamas, brushed his teeth and climbed into bed.

He yanked the curtains shut and cast a silencing charm.

Then he buried his face in his pillow—

And let go.

The sobs tore through him, unstoppable, gut-wrenching, his whole body shaking with the force of them. The pillow was soaked in minutes, his hands gripping at the sheets, his breath ragged, uneven. He didn’t know when it would stop, didn’t know if it could ever stop.

And he cried, he cried and he cried.

*****

Regulus woke up feeling like he’d been hit by at least thirty Bludgers in a row.

His head pounded violently, his limbs ached with exhaustion and his throat was raw — like he’d spent hours screaming.

Which, frankly, he had.

His nose was stuffy, making his breathing uneven, and to top it all off, he’d drooled all over his pillow. Bloody disgusting.

The nightmares had been relentless, worse than they’d been in months.

He barely remembered slipping into sleep, but he remembered thrashing in it. He remembered his sheets tangling around him as he fought against faceless hands. Remembered screaming, crying, gasping for air.

The faces had come back, one after the other, morphing into each other, twisting into grotesque horrors. The governor. Thorne. The woman in the basement. James. Sirius.

James.

Regulus flinched, inhaling sharply, then forced himself out of bed.

A cold shower helped shock some life back into his body, but he was still sluggish and by the time he finally made it out of the dungeons, breakfast was already over.

His morning classes were tolerable. Yes, they had been slightly uncomfortable with his friends sneaking him worried glances, but he had managed to ignore them. Barty, Evan and Isa clearly sensed something was off, but definitely assumed it had to do with Sirius and their fight.

He had a free period before lunch, so he returned to his dorm to grab his books for the afternoon. Instead of returning to the common room or the library to do his homework, he sat on his bed for a long while, staring at the stone ceiling in silence.

When he finally pulled himself up and made his way to the common room, his friends were already gone. He debated staying behind, but the ache in his stomach reminded him he hadn't eaten all day, so he dragged himself to the Great Hall.

He didn't look at the Gryffindor table. He couldn't.

The mere thought of seeing James was complete torture. Just catching a glimpse of him might make him do something uncontrolled. Perhaps he'd faint. Or worse — *cry* . Or perhaps he'd snap and start punching people.

Honestly, that might be the best-case scenario.

So, he distinctly scanned the Slytherin table, catching sight of his friends. Yet, just as he moved to join them, his eyes landed on Miller.

She was sitting with two other girls — one blonde, one with dark

curls. He vaguely remembered one of them was called Violet, the other… Denise or something.

He didn't feel like sitting with Isa, Barty, and Evan. Not with their concerned, cautious looks. With their pity.

So, perhaps a bit unexpectedly, he slipped onto the bench next to Miller instead.

She stiffened in shock. Across from them, her two friends turned bright red.

Regulus ignored them. "So, Miller. Finished the essay?"

Miller blinked, still recovering from the fact that her Captain had just sat next to her. "Uh — yes. I've finished it."

Regulus piled food onto his plate, still studiously avoiding the two girls gaping at him like he was some rare creature in a museum. Their big eyes and red cheeks made him deeply, *deeply* uncomfortable.

"You have it with you?" he asked, taking a bite.

Miller hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah. I have Transfiguration at four."

"Give it to me. I'll look it over now."

Miller fumbled in her bag and passed him the parchment. Regulus scanned it, nodding slightly. It was good. Surprisingly good.

"I like your writing," he said simply.

Miller beamed. "Really?"

Regulus nodded. "You might want to add here—" he pointed at a certain paragraph with his wand, "—*why* a sharp, controlled wand movement is crucial for a successful Switching Spell. You just state that it is."

Miller raised an eyebrow. "Well — because sluggish motions result in partial transfiguration," she said, her tone indicating this was more than obvious.

Regulus smiled knowingly. "You have to be thorough with McGonagall, Miller."

She sighed, a small smile appearing on her lips too. "Yeah. I figured.

I'll change it."

"Then I'm sure your grade will be brilliant."

Miller practically glowed. "Thank you," she said, beaming at him.

A brief silence fell between them before Miller tilted her head. "Alright, so — tell me again about the British and Irish Quidditch League?" she asked. "I swear, half of it makes no sense."

Regulus huffed. "Alright. But only if you elaborate on why your bloody football league has so many cups. *That* truly makes no sense at all."

Miller snorted — rather inelegantly — and shook her head. "It's not *that* many."

Their conversation continued, Miller launching into an animated explanation about the Champions League while Regulus listened. He ate slowly, a smirk tugging at his lips as Miller's hands gestured wildly, nearly knocking over her goblet as she mimicked a dramatic goal celebration.

He ignored the curious stares of his friends — Evan and Barty exchanging suggestive smirks, clearly entertained by his choice of company, while Isa looked contemplative, deep in thought.

And he *especially* ignored the stares from certain people at the Gryffindor table and the hollow yet consuming ache of despair in his stomach, signalling he had just lost the most precious thing in the world.

*****

Regulus was certain that Thursday afternoon was one of Barty and Evan's favourite moments of the week. This was an astonishing notion, considering it involved sitting through a class — something they both generally despised. But they made an exception for Defence, especially now that it was taught by 'the most sinfully gorgeous to ever grace this cursed school', as Barty had once put it. The fact that she was dangerously competent came second to that.

They had pitched their preferred topics for the class in the first week, and, much to Barty and Evan's frustration, Valaine had chosen dark creatures and magical espionage over theirs. Predictably, they had lobbied for duelling. Now that the first two topics had been covered,

dueling was finally next — but, as with all new units, Valaine had instructed them to redo their pitches to refresh everyone's memory.

Now, with Captaincy consuming two nights and a morning, and his load of homework for all the courses he was taking, Regulus had barely any time left — the main reason why he'd outsourced the Defence pitch to Barty and Evan. Isa, who didn't have Quidditch but took more subjects, had an equally tragic lack of breathing space and had done the same. Barty and Evan didn't take as many classes and were, conveniently, very passionate about Defence, so it was only logical for them to take the lead.

Yet, as they sat at breakfast that morning, Regulus was starting to tremendously regret this choice — and judging by Isa's worried expression, she was feeling the same.

Of course, his friends had been practically vibrating with anticipation ever since Valaine announced duelling was next. Especially after a year of having their enthusiasm crushed by that Ministry lackey, they now looked like unleashed hounds at breakfast, vibrating with energy before class.

The seven of them sat huddled together at the Slytherin table — Barty, Evan, Isa, Mulciber, Avery, Severus and Regulus himself.

"It's bloody stupid we even have to pitch this," Barty scoffed, aggressively buttering his toast. "With everything happening, learning how to fight is the bare minimum this school should be offering."

Evan nodded. "Imagine being able to recite every bloody Goblin war but not knowing how to shield yourself from a single hex thrown by some modernist lunatic."

Barty smirked. "Like, yeah — I can list all the rebellions in order, but the moment some two-bit revolutionary actually curses me, I crumble. That'd be so fucking useful."

Isa, barely suppressing an eye-roll, speared a piece of sausage with her fork. "This better not be your actual pitch, Crouch."

Severus, who had been listening with a sharp-eyed intensity, finally spoke. "Valaine has you doing this in pairs?"

Isa snorted, shaking her head. "No. We're in the same group." She shot a glance at Evan and Barty, who were still talking over one another, completely absorbed in their topic. "But these two are enthusiastic

enough for six people, so Reg and I are practically sitting this one out."

Regulus forced a tight-lipped smile, though unease settled in his stomach. Their enthusiasm was understandable — expected, too — but he had an inkling that their particular brand of zeal might come across… wrong.

The truth was, they had no idea where Valaine stood in all of this. She was smug, competent and undoubtedly sharp. There was something all-knowing and calculating about her that unsettled Regulus, because no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't quite pin down her loyalties. He prided himself on being observant — perceptive — yet Valaine remained an enigma, and it was *infuriating*.

The Ministry woman last year had made her loyalties crystal clear — Minchum's lapdog, through and through.

And Thorne…

A violent wave of nausea washed over him.

Thorne had seemed like one of them. Had belonged with them, with the Revolution. But in the end, he had betrayed them all.

"So… you're a spy?" — You're with them? With the modernists?"

"Yeah."

Regulus winced, shaking off the memory and forcing himself to focus on the present, where Barty and Evan were now launching into a passionate spiel about the beauty, utility and necessity of duelling.

"—and if they expect us to sit through another year of rubbish theory without application, they can shove it," Barty shot. "We should be duelling every week. That's the whole point of Defence."

Evan nodded. "Yes — the *only* bloody thing that actually matters."

Regulus and Isa exchanged a glance, silently communicating the same sentiment — this was going to be a disaster.

Regulus cleared his throat. "But mate, you'd better… you know… present it… differently."

Evan tossed him a glare. "No, Black — you left it in our hands, so that's that. We're going to do brilliant. Don't worry."

Now, Regulus didn't want to step on anyone's toes, but worrying was, in fact, precisely what he was doing now.

And Isa's face betrayed the same sentiment — *shit.*

*****

Regulus's predictions turned out to be entirely correct.

Valaine louned lazily in her chair, legs crossed atop her desk, wand twirling idly between her fingers in an effortless display of control. Her gaze flicked toward Regulus's corner, where he sat with Isa, while Barty and Evan sat together in the row before them.

She turned fully in their direction, an almost careless smirk tugging at her lips. "Alright then," she drawled. "It's your turn today."

He felt the tension coil in his stomach before Barty had even stood. He decided to remain seated and gestured for Isa to do the same while Barty and Evan took the floor, both of them practically thrumming with excitement.

Valaine's gaze flicked lazily between the two of them before shifting back to Regulus and Isa. "And, for good measure, what is your topic of choice?"

Evan answered swiftly. "We chose duelling."

"Interesting." Valaine tilted her head, nodding, voice slow, calculating. "And why?"

Barty barely let her finish the question. "Because of what's happening outside, of course!"

Regulus winced, exchanging a painfully knowing glance with Isa.

Valaine's smile sharpened, still blindly twirling her wand between her fingers. "And what is happening, exactly, Mr. Crouch?" she asked, an amused challenge lilt to her voice.

Barty didn't miss a beat. "The Revolution, of course."

Regulus closed his eyes briefly.

Oh, for *fuck's* sake.

"You call that a Revolution, Mr. Crouch?" Valaine's tone was amused,

almost mocking.

“Yes,” Barty pressed. “The Ministry is trying to hide it, but it’s clear, isn’t it? War is inevitable.”

Regulus’s pulse spiked. He needed to intervene — needed to steer this away before Barty said too much. He shifted forward, opening his mouth—

—but the classroom erupted into chaos before he could get a word in.

A chorus of Gryffindor voices rang out in furious opposition. One student scoffed about propaganda, another accused them of delusion, someone shouted something about terrorism. Naturally, Taylor was the loudest — if he’d had the nerve to interrupt Maddock last week, of course he wouldn’t hold back now.

Valaine’s expression remained unreadable, but there was something in the way her eyes flickered over each student — assessing, dissecting. She was watching, calculating, utterly enjoying the show.

She let them go at it for a few moments before she silenced the room with a single flick of her fingers. The air crackled.

“Alright then,” she drawled, her voice still edged with amusement but laced with something sharper. “With all of these things happening outside… tell me, why duelling?”

Evan stepped in smoothly, his tone just the right balance of composure and passion. “Because it’s all well and good to know about dark creatures and espionage, but at the end of the day — when there’s a war outside — you want to be able to protect yourself, don’t you?”

A few students nodded in agreement, though others remained stiff, wary.

Crabbe and Selwyn voiced their approval, but, as always and to no one’s surprise, Barty took it a step further.

“It’s not just about defending yourself,” he said, eyes glinting with fervour. “If you’re good enough, the fight doesn’t last long enough to need defense. A duel is about knowing how to strike first and strike hard.”

Regulus barely suppressed a grimace.

His instincts screamed at him — *abort.*

“If I may add something, Professor,” Regulus interjected smoothly, voice steady and controlled. “I think what Barty and Evan mean is that — well, this is a Defence classroom. But to be able to defend, you have to understand — really grasp — the offense as well. You can’t defend yourself without knowing what you’re defending against. So, in a way, offense and defense go hand-in-hand.”

Valaine’s gaze snapped to him. She watched him for a moment too long, a slow smirk curling her lips, something wicked flickering in her eyes.

“Well,” she mused, leaning back, still idly twirling her wand. “Now *that* is actually a compelling case.”

Her gaze flicked to Barty and Evan, her smirk deepening. “I’m sure that was right on the tip of your tongues.”

She let the silence stretch, her amusement palpable. Then, finally, she straightened slightly, her tone shifting — sharp, decisive.

“Alright then. We start with theory.”

Her eyes gleamed wickedly.

“Next week, we move on to the practical side.”

*****

Saturday evening, Regulus flooed to Grimmauld Place, then to Bellatrix’s, for a meeting. He had known, thanks to a brief letter from Cissy, that he’d be out of Hogwarts for a few hours to ‘meet Mother’, so for once, he’d had some idea of what to expect when he stepped through the fireplace.

He hadn’t known what it was about, though. He expected it had probably something to do with the attack in Diagon Alley — and if not, about something else important. Surely they wouldn’t pull him out of the Castle for a mundane, routine meeting.

I had then come as a surprise that it *had* been a mundane, routine meeting. The meeting had been entirely unremarkable.

They barely discussed the attack in Diagon Alley and instead launched into dull chatter about new recruits and political maneuvering. Even

Hogwarts was barely mentioned.

The only remotely interesting thing was that, once again, the Dark Lord asked him to stay behind. And, once again, for nothing but fleeting small talk and a few carefully placed compliments.

It left Regulus with an unsettled feeling. He was quite certain that the Dark Lord didn't make a habit of pulling others aside just to indulge in idle chit-chat.

It unnerved him.

So, he was glad to return to Hogwarts, glad to assure Slughorn that his mother was still fragile but 'recovering well', and glad to make his way toward the dungeons — when he nearly collided with Evan in the Entrance Hall.

"Black," Evan smirked, seamlessly falling into step beside him.

"Where are you coming from?" Regulus asked as they descended the stairs toward the dungeons.

"Library."

Regulus quirked a brow. Evan Rosier spending his Saturday evening in the library was about as likely as the Dark Lord inviting him over for tea and biscuits.

Evan seemed to sense his thoughts.

"Not for me," he clarified, rolling his eyes. "Walked Melania there. You know, didn't want to risk her falling into the hands of some Gryffindors."

Regulus didn't miss the slight blush creeping up Evan's neck.

"How noble of you," Regulus smirked. "A true knight in shining robes."

"Oh, piss off," Evan shot back, but there was no real bite to it. Then, definitely eager to change the subject, he added, "You wouldn't believe how crowded it is on a Saturday evening. All the seventh-years were there — Avery, Mulciber, Snape, Eira, Celine, and their lot." He sighed, then let his gaze flicker over Regulus. "How's your mum?"

Regulus shrugged, not quite meeting Evan's gaze. He was glad to realise that Evan would take that as general discomfort at discussing

his mother, and not about his utter discomfort at lying about such a thing.

“She’s… alright, I guess,” he said vaguely.

Evan nodded, accepting the answer without pressing further, and they walked the rest of the way to the common room in amicable silence.

They spotted them the moment they stepped inside.

Isa and Barty were slumped in their usual corner, howling with laughter, heads nearly colliding as they wheezed over something spread across the table.

Regulus and Evan exchanged glances before stepping closer, immediately sensing that something was off.

Up close, the scene only got stranger.

Isa and Barty were blindly scrawling on parchment — heads tilted away, quills moving aimlessly — and then roaring with laughter at the results.

Regulus’s gaze flickered downward.

A half-empty bottle of Firewhiskey sat discreetly beside the sofa.

Ah. There it was.

They were sloshed.

“What the fuck?” Regulus muttered under his breath, just loud enough for Evan to hear. “They’re *drunk* ?”

Sure, Barty and Isa enjoyed their liquor from time to time — but always at a party or gathering. Not like this, like a pair of depressed drunkards on a random Saturday evening.

Evan sighed. “I was afraid this might happen.”

Regulus shot him a sharp look. “What? Why?”

Evan scratched the back of his neck, hesitating. “Barty got a letter from his aunt this morning.”

Regulus stiffened. “His mum?”

Evan exhaled, nodding. “She’s getting worse. She’s in Germany now with her sister. They’re thinking about admitting her to a—” he paused, glancing around as if debating whether to say it out loud, “—a special hospital.”

Regulus felt a pang of guilt at Barty’s mum being actually ill. As opposed to Mr. Crouch Sr., who was absent, detached, entirely uninterested and, frankly, a complete prat, his mother had always been everything for Barty — loving, warm, devoted.

It was no secret that Barty despised his father, but Regulus had always suspected that the real betrayal wasn’t his father’s neglect of him — it was the way he kept abandoning his mother.

It didn’t take a genius to know that Barty took that personally at a whole unprecedented level.

“Brilliant timing for Warrington to sit in the library then,” Regulus said sourly.

Evan snorted. Then, after a beat, he shifted uncomfortably. “I — I don’t think she knows.”

Regulus blinked. “*What?* ” He turned to Evan, baffled. “But they’ve been like… together for ages now.”

Evan shrugged. “Yeah, but this… I don’t know. It’s a sensitive topic.”

Regulus didn’t get the chance to respond to that, as Barty and Isa had apparently noticed their presence.

Barty grinned up at them, lifting his quill with an exaggerated flourish.

“Well, well, if it isn’t our golden boy,” he drawled. “And Rosier — looking ravishing as always.”

Isa and Barty turned to each other, then back at them — before collapsing into hysterical laughter all over again.

Barty, still laughing, grabbed the bottle and held it up triumphantly. There were only a few pitiful sips left.

“We saved you some,” he declared solemnly.

Evan stared at the bottle and let out an unimpressed snort. “Oh, how generous.”

"This truly is a new level of pathetic," Regulus said flatly. "Getting plastered on a random Saturday evening."

Isa lifted a wobbly finger, slurring, "I'll have you know we're not pathetic, Reg. Just… *bon vivants*."

She and Barty looked at each other and immediately burst into another round of laughter.

Regulus groaned, rubbing his temple. There was something uniquely torturous about the combination of Isa and Barty when they were drunk. Separately, they were already a lot to deal with, but together — just one big tornado of discomfort and exasperation.

"Should've joined everyone in the library," he muttered.

Barty shook his head fervently, then said with deep, drunken offense, "Who goes to study in the library on a Saturday evening?"

Regulus shot him a look. "Some of us take more than four subjects, Crouch."

Barty and Isa waved that off like it was the most ridiculous thing they'd ever heard — and as if Isa herself wasn't a massive swot.

The idiotic drawing game continued for another hour, during which Regulus lost count of the number of times they collapsed into laughter over absolutely nothing. Eventually, students began dribbling back into the common room to avoid breaking curfew.

Regulus and Evan, well aware of Eira's precarious relationship with Isa, thought it best to send the two of them off before things got messy. Sure, Isa and Eira were civil, but Eira still hadn't forgotten the mortifying moment she'd tried to hook up with Regulus in his dorm — only for Isa to burst in at the worst possible moment. And well, it was obvious that Eira felt threatened by Isa's friendship with Barty.

Regulus couldn't exactly blame her. If given the choice between Isadora Nott and Eira Warrington, anyone in their right mind would pick Isa.

Evan clapped his hands together. "Alright, you two — off to your dorms. You're both sloshed, better to sleep it off before you embarrass yourselves any further."

Isa wobbled to her feet, following Regulus and Evan toward the boys'

dorm as if that were a perfectly reasonable next step.

Regulus raised an eyebrow. “To your own dorm, Nott. Do I need to walk you?”

Isa, swaying slightly, looked up at him, deep in drunken contemplation. “Nah,” she decided. “I don’t feel like sleeping in my own dorm. I’m gonna crash here.”

Regulus felt an instant headache forming.

“You are not sleeping in my bed, Nott.”

Isa sighed dramatically before flopping onto Barty’s bed like a ragdoll. “I’ll take Crouch’s bed, then.”

Regulus’s reaction was immediate and uncompromising. “*No*.”

Barty, standing in the doorway to the bathroom, simply smirked. Evan, beside him, sniggered at Regulus’s reaction.

The absolute — absolute — last place Isa needed to sleep was in Barty’s bed while they were both drunk. Apart from the obvious disaster it would cause with Warrington, Regulus was quite sure that an intoxicated Barty would have zero self-restraint if Isa was next to him, sloshed and wearing that ridiculously revealing underdress of hers.

Regulus sighed, running a hand down his face. “Fine. You’re sleeping in my bed.”

Isa cheered like a child who’d just won a prize, stumbling up from Barty’s bed and making her way toward Regulus’s.

And then, without warning, she started taking off her clothes.

Regulus froze. "Oh*, come on*, Nott — there's a bathroom right there," he said, exasperatedly gesturing toward the room only feet away.

She ignored him completely.

Immediately, he stepped in front of her, trying to strategically shield her from view.

A difficult task, considering Barty was lounging near the bathroom door while Evan stood by the window at the other side of the dorm, both with prime view of the disaster unfolding.

“No one cares, Reg,” Isa shot. “I’m not *naked*.”

He looked at the dress – thin fabric, barely covering what it was supposed to, highlighting every part of her body that Regulus really wished it didn’t. The material was so flimsy it was practically see-through, clinging to her in ways that left very little to the imagination.

So, as a matter of fact, yes — she was, actually, practically naked.

His brain short-circuited.

“For *fuck’s* sake,” he groaned, quickly stepping behind her as she wandered toward his bed, positioning himself strategically to block her from view.

Evan looked vaguely uncomfortable, but far too entertained — probably especially by Regulus — to look away.

Barty, on the other hand, had the audacity to lean against the doorframe and *smirk* , his gaze languidly trailing over Isa like he was enjoying a private show.

Regulus shot him a fierce glare before shoving Isa under the duvet, tucking the blanket around her shoulders carefully.

Great. At least now she was covered.

Not for long though. No sooner had he turned away than Isa abruptly sat up and climbed back out.

Regulus groaned. "What now?"

And then — of course, because that was life — it got worse.

She bent over, rummaging through her robe on the floor, completely oblivious to the way her bum was sticking right out toward Barty and how, from Evan’s angle, far too much of her chest was suddenly visible.

Regulus didn’t need to look to know Evan was desperately trying not to laugh.

Isa straightened up, victorious, a package of cigarettes in hand. She climbed back into bed, pulling out a cigarette like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Realisation dawned.

"Oh, no. No, no," Regulus said sharply. "You are *not* smoking those filthy things in my bed, Isa. You are *not* —"

She lit the cigarette.

Regulus let out a strangled sound of despair.

Isa, completely unbothered, tossed one to Barty, who had sprawled onto his own bed with a lazy grin.

Regulus shook his head in disbelief and stalked off to the bathroom, stripping off his stiff robes in favour of something more comfortable. By the time he returned, the air was thick with smoke, though at least the cigarettes were finished.

"Disgusting," he muttered under his breath, waving a hand in front of his face.

Isa grinned, utterly unrepentant. "Ah, you love me anyway, Reg. If you take up the habit, you won't feel so repulsed."

"Fat chance," Regulus shot.

Isa slowly tilted her head, her hair slipping over her shoulder. "It would suit you, though. The whole broody, melancholy aristocrat thing."

Evan and Barty howled with laughter.

Regulus felt heat creep up his neck. "Shut up, Nott." With a flick of his wand, he cleared the air of smoke and wordlessly cast another spell, a fresh, minty breeze swirling briefly around Isa's mouth.

Isa barely had time to react before realisation dawned. "Did you just —"

"Brushed your teeth," Regulus said flatly.

She blinked. Then she let out a contented little hum, a pleased sound low in her throat as she curled deeper into the duvet. Her smile was slow and utterly self-indulgent, like a cat stretching in a patch of sun. She tucked herself further in, her hair splaying over the pillow, looking entirely too satisfied.

Regulus rolled his eyes but sighed as he reached for the blanket, tucking it more securely around her. His fingers brushed lightly over the fabric, smoothing it over her shoulders, ensuring she was warm.

Isa, still smiling lazily, made no effort to help, letting herself be fussed over like a pampered princess.

God, was she plastered.

Across the room, Barty and Evan exchanged a very knowing look, their smirks downright insufferable as they sniggered under their breath.

Regulus shot them a murderous glare.

"Bloody ridiculous," he muttered under his breath. "Getting sloshed on a Saturday evening. Can't even sleep properly in my own bed."

He was exhausted — completely knackered. The week had been horrible and it was weighing on him. Not a night, he hadn't dreamt of James — of his hands, his teasing laugh and his soft lips. The few hours he wasn't plagued by all he had lost, the usual nightmares took over. He didn't quite know which was worse.

With a relentless dread gnawing at him constantly, a tension coiling in his chest at the thought of running into James in the castle or seeing him at meals, his nerves hadn't had a moment's rest in days.

Besides, leaving Isa alone while she was this drunk was definitely not an option. He'd have to stay until she fell asleep at least.

So, still a little irritated, he climbed into the bed beside her, pulling the duvet over both of them with clipped movements.

Evan, meanwhile, was guiding Barty toward his own bed, clapping him on the shoulder. "Better sleep too, mate."

Regulus exhaled sharply and reached for the curtains, yanking them shut. The dorm fell into a quiet hush, but in the confined space of his bed, Isa was still very much awake.

When he turned his head, he found her lying on her side, facing him, her expression utterly blissed-out. The dim light caught on the delicate curve of her cheek, the flutter of her lashes against her skin as she blinked up at him, slow and syrupy. Then, her lips curled into a lopsided smirk.

"Ooooh," she drawled, voice slurred but playful. "I get to share the bed with the pretty boy with the beautiful eyes."

Regulus froze.

He felt heat shoot up his neck, the mortification so absolute that he groaned in utter despair.

From their respective beds, Barty and Evan absolutely lost it. They couldn't see them, but they could, very unfortunately, hear them.

Regulus barely spared a second before whipping out his wand and casting a silencing charm, ensuring that whatever rubbish Isa spouted next would at least stay between them.

Isa, unfazed, laughed too, soft and unfiltered. The sound melted through the silence, warm and rich, edged with something sweet.

Regulus sighed, rubbing his temple. "Shut up, Ies. Go to sleep."

Isa only smiled, lazy and knowing. "You really are though, Reg."

Her voice was softer now, stripped of its usual teasing. Regulus turned his head, and saw her looking at him — really looking at him. Her gaze moved slowly, deliberately, trailing through his curls, down to his grey eyes — lingering there for a moment — before finally settling on his lips.

A breath hitched in his throat.

Then, featherlight, her fingers brushed along the sharp line of his jaw. Her thumb skimmed over his cheekbone, tracing it with an air of intensity that made Regulus go still.

"You really are pretty," she murmured.

Regulus stopped breathing.

No. No. This was weird. Isa was being weird.

His body reacted before his mind caught up, his entire posture stiffening, his expression schooling into something impassive. His voice, when he finally spoke, was steady — carefully neutral, a line drawn very firm in the sand.

“Go to sleep, Ies.”

She only smiled again, softer this time, with an edge of something almost wistful. Then, she sighed. "It’s a shame you don’t see it yourself, Reg."

And before he could reply, she shifted forward, resting her head against his chest.

Regulus stiffened.

What was he supposed to do now?

Yes, they had shared a bed before. Yes, they had even shared *this* bed before. But there had always been a boundary, a careful distance between them; even in a space this small, Regulus had always made sure of that.

This, however — this was different. This was her body against his, the slow rise and fall of her breathing pressing into him, the loose drape of her arm across his waist, her warmth curling into the fabric of his shirt.

It was intimate in a way which made him utterly uncomfortable.

He wasn't sure how much time passed before her voice broke through the silence, small now, uncertain.

"…Is this okay, Reg?"

Regulus hesitated. Everything about this should have been wrong — the heat of her body against his, the way her arm loosely draped across his waist, her breath warm against his collarbone.

But beneath all of that, beneath the awkwardness and the instinctive discomfort, there was the knowledge that this was Isa. His Isa. The person he would do anything for. This shouldn't be uncomfortable at all — just his best friend curling up against him.

"It's just nice, you know," she whispered. "You know I hate sleeping alone."

Regulus swallowed, nodding slightly, his mind overwhelmed with thoughts and feelings.

Isa continued. Her voice was soft, barely audible — a whisper, thick with emotion. "I feel so alone all the time, Reg."

His breath hitched.

Isa let out a trembling exhale, her body curling tighter into his, and then — she sniffled. Her shoulders tremoured, her fingers curled into the fabric of his shirt as she cried.

The ache that bloomed in his chest was slow and deep. He hated to see her cry. Wordlessly, instinctively, he pulled her in — one arm wrapping around her back, his hand smoothing gently over her hair.

"Shh," he soothed, voice low, careful. "Of course you can lie here. Just… close your eyes. Go to sleep."

Regulus stayed still as Isa cried and cried, until the quiet rhythm of her breath gradually evened out against his chest. Eventually, she stilled completely.

She was asleep.

Regulus, however, stayed awake long after that. For a long time, he just stared at the ceiling, unmoving, his mind tangled in thoughts he couldn’t quite unknot.

Chapter 13: Of Fun & Deception

Chapter Notes

> Hi everyone, another chapter for the weekend. I hope you enjoy. Thanks as always for the kudos and comments, you make my day!
>
> And, for those concerned, yes, this fic has a Jegulus endgame. It just takes some time and sacrifices to get there. It's a bumpy road. Well... more of a mountain range, really.
>
> Lots of love ❤

The time leading up to the Christmas holidays was strange — it both passed impossibly slow and flew by. Time flew in classes, or when Regulus was trying to keep up with the inhumane load of homework dumped upon him. But time passed impossibly, unfathomably, torturously slow during the Potions classes. Evans and Amaryllis had covered for the absence of Regulus, Isa, Sirius and James during that particular class, but they could hardly stay away from the other classes too. Regulus had a Professor to woo and stay on good terms with, so there was no other option but to sit through the slow torture that was sharing a table with James and Sirius.

Luckily, Sirius stayed silent, distant — probably as per James's advice — and the brothers sat as far apart as possible, neither sharing a glance nor a word. Regulus very strongly felt James's discomfort at the table, and the fleeting moments Regulus risked looking at him, he saw the guilt flicker across his face.

Regulus had a hard time not calling him out for it, because whatever had happened between Regulus and Sirius had nothing, *nothing*, to do with James. But perhaps James didn't feel guilty about that. Perhaps James felt guilty about his love for Regulus. And well, although Regulus knew the ins and outs of the reasons behind it, the fact that he felt guilty, or perhaps even ashamed, for loving Regulus, was a dagger to his heart, twisting cruelly. And although his heart was already broken — by his own hand too — it still ached. A slow, deep agony like pressing on a wound that would never heal.

Because, yes, Regulus was ashamed of loving a bloke. Just the thought of people knowing — knowing the ways in which he and James had touched, had whispered sweet nothings, had loved each other — sent a jolt of shame through him, seeping hot into his bones.

But despite everything, despite being on the opposite side of the war, Regulus would never feel guilty — nor ashamed — for loving James Potter. How could he? How could he regret or feel guilty of loving the most beautiful, kind and maddeningly brilliant bloke to walk this earth?

But he had to let him go. He had needed to let him go. And not just because of the war — no, even if there had been no war, they still could never have been.

The idea of people finding out that Regulus Arcturus Black, Heir to the most powerful, most ancient and most wealthy pure-blood family in the whole of Britain, loved a bloke — that was atrocious. And the idea of Mother finding out that James Potter had taken both her sons from her… *Oh*, the wrath that would unleash…

No. There had never been a way. He had known it from the start. Had known it from that first kiss in the Charms classroom on the third floor, where an entire new world had unfurled before him.

A world where he had discovered the thrill of lips against his, the sensation of tongues teasing and clashing, the shuddering, breathtaking feeling of hands mapping his skin. A world Regulus could love and make love, could be loved and be made love to.

And although he had known, and although he knew he had brought this pain upon himself — it still hurt. It hurt like someone had cracked his ribs open and torn his heart out — not all at once, but slowly, torturously, inch by inch, until all that remained was a hollow, aching void that would never be filled.

But he could push it away, the ache of missing him. Most of the time, he could ignore it. Often he could shove it down, bury it beneath so many layers.

At Seacliff Hall, he had endured years of torture. A torture that made the highest level of hell seem merciful. The guilt, the self-loathing, the utter, gut-wrenching shame of not standing up for himself, of, despite everything, still loving the man who had inflicted it all — loving him like a child loved their parents, no matter how undeserved. But of course, the love that was reciprocated turned out to be no love at all. And certainly not the kind that a parent-figure owed a child.

But it had made Regulus resilient. Had made him adept at boxing up his emotions, locking them away where they couldn't touch him. For years, he had pushed away what had happened behind closed doors,

under those abhorred sheets, beneath violating hands. For years, he had pushed away himself — presenting only the version the world expected to see.

So yes, he could. He could often push down the emotions that James evoked.

But sometimes he couldn't. One of the hardest moments came after Quidditch training.

The team was thriving — Lively was becoming an excellent Keeper, the Chaser had found their rhythm with Miller leading and outshining them all, and the Carrow twins were no longer just working together but seamlessly coordinated with the rest of the team. He was sure they'd smash Ravenclaw in January.

It should have felt good. And it did — until the moment training ended, and the joy was crushed the second he stepped into the locker room. He'd gather his things and walk with Miller to the dungeons just to keep his thoughts off the route he would normally take. The route to the fifth floor, to the Prefects' Bathroom.

He would never step inside that bathroom again.

As for the war, there hadn't been any major, life-altering changes. There hadn't been an attack matching that of Diagon Alley, but there had been several smaller attacks and raids, each scrutinised under a magnifying glass in its aftermath.

The Prophet was flooded with letters from the public — some urging Minchum to officially declare war, others pleading for restraint, and meanwhile, several countries had begun closing their borders to the Brits, strengthening wards against Apparition.

So, major attack or not, the entire situation was a mess and the unrest was just as tangible within the castle walls. There had even been talk of cancelling the final Hogsmeade trip before the holidays, though, apparently, the staff had decided against it.

Now, on the last weekend before the final week before the holidays, Regulus sat at breakfast with Barty, Evan, Isa, Avery and Mulciber, his back to the rest of the Great Hall on purpose.

"All right, so you lot going to Hogsmeade?" Avery asked, glancing around the table.

Everyone nodded.

“You too, right?” Evan prompted, looking at Mulciber.

Mulciber let out a long-suffering sigh. “Think I’m staying back, actually. Might hit the library.”

Avery nodded with a pained expression on his face.

Barty, mid-bite, choked on his food. “*You?* You’re choosing the library over Hogsmeade?”

Mulciber looked downright miserable. “Yeah, well, with all the bloody detentions we’ve had, I’ve barely had time to revise. If I don’t pass my N.E.W.T.s, I’m fucked. My dad’ll have my head.”

Avery made a disgruntled noise. “Yeah. Same here.”

Evan glanced between Isa, Regulus and Barty. “Right, that makes three of us, then. And obviously, Melania’s coming too.”

At that, Barty shifted uncomfortably, eyes locked on his plate. “Yeah, I’ll, uh… catch up with you lot later. I’m going with Eira first.”

Regulus exchanged a glance with Isa and Evan, Isa biting her lip to keep from laughing. The twinkling eyes still very much gave her amusement away.

Isa leaned in with a smirk. “Ahhh, so you’re… going on a *date* with her first?”

Barty shot her a sharp glare. “Yeah, well, I won’t see her over the holidays, and — we’re just having a drink together.”

Regulus bit back a laugh, though, like Isa, his eyes twinkled with amusement at the sight of Barty very visibly uncomfortable about liking Warrington.

Like it wasn’t perfectly clear that Barty fancied her — they had been exclusive for months.

Isa’s smirk widened. “Ooooh, Crouch, are you in *loooove*?”

Evan grinned, spelling out the familiar letters with glee. “L-O-V-E!”

Barty’s face tinged pink as he brandished his fork at them in mock warning. “Careful now, or I’ll hex you both into next year.” Then,

turning to Regulus, he narrowed his eyes. “And don’t think I don’t see you fucking laughing, Black.”

Isa burst into laughter, tossing her fork onto her plate before pushing up from the bench. “Right, I need to grab something from the dorm.” Then, as she turned away, she added over her shoulder — her eyes locking briefly on Regulus — “Wait for me, alright?”

Regulus gave a small nod, turning back to his poached eggs. It was only when he glanced up to grab his pumpkin juice that he noticed the silence fallen over the table.

He frowned, looking at friends all watching him with identical smirks.

“…What?”

Barty, smirking, mimicked, “‘*Wait for me, yeah?*’”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “That was directed at all of us, you idiot.”

Evan snickered. “Oh no, that was *definitely* directed at the ‘pretty boy with the beautiful eyes’.”

Barty grinned. “Oh, absolutely. Nott clearly wants to go to Hogsmeade with her ‘broody, melancholic aristocrat’.”

The whole table erupted into laughter.

Regulus fought back the heat rising in his neck, stabbing at his toast. Then, with a slow, deadpan look at Barty, he said, “Oh, fuck off. Don’t you have a *romantic* little date to swoon over at Madame Puddifoot’s, Crouch?”

Barty shot him a fierce glare as the rest howled with laughter.

It was the umpteenth time that Barty and Evan found an opportunity to quote Isa’s words from when she was drunk in the dorm, and, truth to be told, it was getting old. He considered it a small mercy that they never did it with Isa around — it was later when he realised they didn’t bring it up with her around because they were afraid to jinx whatever they thought was going on or growing between him and Isa. And well, the realisation that they were actually serious about this only made matters worse.

Regulus hadn’t brought up what had happened that night in the dorm, and Isa either didn’t remember or had been too embarrassed to bring

it up herself.

He knew she was going through a rough time. The end of November marked the anniversary of her and Davies, and, beyond losing the love of her life, Regulus knew she was terrified of losing the two remaining most important men in her life: her father, whose arms she had definitely seen bearing the Mark and who she knew was an active Revolutionary, and Regulus, her best friend, who was just as deeply entangled in the war as her father was.

So, yes. He knew she was struggling sometimes and he knew she was allowed a night like that — getting drunk, crying her heart out in the arms of someone who loved her. And no matter how many times she might break down — which, knowing the ferocity and resilience of Isadora Nott, wouldn't be often — he'd always be there. Always.

But still.

He couldn't shake the feeling that something about it had been off. That they'd been teetering on the edge of something. That Isa had tried to cross a boundary they had never crossed before.

And he had no bloody clue what to do with that.

So he simply didn't bring it up. Because if it wasn't spoken aloud, it wasn't really, really true. And if she couldn't remember it, then only he knew, meaning he could pretend it had never happened in the first place.

They had agreed to get their shopping done first before spending the rest of the afternoon in the Three Broomsticks because it was far too cold to wander around aimlessly. The village was packed, filled with students eager to enjoy the last Hogsmeade weekend before the holidays.

As they passed Madame Puddifoot's, they saw it crammed with couples, its windows fogged up from the warmth inside. Regulus realised that meant the Three Broomsticks would be just as busy. Barty had joined them after spending the first part of the day with Eira, who had now gone off with her friends to do some shopping.

Regulus walked slightly ahead of the group — Isa, Barty, Evan and Melania following behind him — as he reached for the door of the Three Broomsticks. The moment he stepped inside, the warmth hit him, along with the hum of conversation, the clatter of mugs and the rich scent of butterbeer and firewhiskey. As expected, it was packed.

And if it was this busy, then a certain person was bound to be here.

His gaze swept the room. There were several students from different houses that he recognised, and there were some teachers too. His eyes settled on an empty booth near the back. He made for it, but halfway there, his breath caught.

James.

Their eyes met, and Regulus felt his throat go dry, his heart stuttering in his chest. It lasted only a second, but that was enough. James's cheeks flushed slightly. It probably wasn't noticeable to anyone else, but Regulus knew every inch of his skin intimately. He quickly tore his gaze away.

He let his eyes travel over the rest of the table. Sirius was there, of course, his eyes blazing. Lupin and Pettigrew flanked him, both looking over as well. Then there was Evans, McKinnon, Macdonald, and, to Regulus's surprise, Alice Fortescue and Frank Longbottom.

Ah. *That's* why they had been allowed to go to Hogsmeade. Aurors were definitely stationed throughout the village.

He could *feel* the tension simmering in the air — the unspoken hostility between Barty, Evan and Regulus and the Gryffindor table. Before anything could escalate, Regulus turned sharply on his heel and strode toward the opposite side of the pub, claiming the empty booth there.

Barty followed, hissing. "Can't wait until we're out of this place and —"

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Regulus cut in, voice even as he saw Melania and Isa heading for the bar to order their drinks. "You still have a year and a half left at Hogwarts."

Barty scoffed, sliding into the seat across from him. "Bloody useless. I'd much rather drop out and join."

Regulus leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice. "You're much more valuable at Hogwarts, Barty. You know you can't afford to be expelled."

Barty opened his mouth, but Regulus was faster. His tone wasn't unkind, but it was firm.

“We’ve discussed this,” he said. “You have to stay undercover. If you’re going to join, *He* wants you here, at Hogwarts, for a reason. You cannot be expelled or drop out, Barty.”

Something flickered across Barty’s face — frustration, then thoughtfulness.

“Besides, mate,” Regulus added, his voice dipping lower, “there’s a lot more to learn here that we can use later. You’re thinking too short-term.”

Isa and Melania returned with the drinks, setting them down on the table.

Evan snorted. “You sound *exactly* like Professor Thorne. He said that to us once, didn’t he? In your drawing room?”

Regulus felt the blood drain from his face.

Barty grinned. “Yeah, he was *wicked*. Think we’ll see him again at some point?”

Regulus’s throat tightened. He didn’t look at Isa. He had no idea how much she knew — but surely she knew something.

If any of them knew. Knew that Thorne was dead. That Regulus was the one who had killed him…

“Yeah,” he said finally, voice thin. “At some point, I guess.”

*****

The afternoon was filled with easy banter and endless talks about the Slytherin Christmas party that evening. Regulus was once again pleased that Barty, Evan and the girls had joined forces with the seventh-years to throw the party and that no one expected him to be involved in any of the planning.

“We’ve got the Firewhiskey, the snacks, the decorations…” Barty said. “It’s gonna be fucking brilliant.”

Evan nodded in agreement. “Yeah, the last Slytherin party of the year!”

“Oh, *shit*,” Isa suddenly muttered, sitting up straighter.

Everyone turned to look at her.

“I almost forgot,” she said, pushing back her chair.

Regulus frowned as she stood, looking oddly determined. “Forgot *what*?”

Isa didn’t answer. “Back in a minute.”

They watched as she weaved her way through the crowded pub. Regulus glanced at Evan, who only shrugged. Then, to his utter surprise, Isa stopped—

—at *James’s* table.

Evan and Barty both straightened immediately, their easygoing demeanours vanishing in an instant.

“What the *fuck* ?” Barty muttered under his breath.

Regulus watched as Isa exchanged a few words with Evans. Their conversation had a casual ease to it, almost as if they were… friendly.

Isa handed her something, though Regulus couldn’t see what, and Evans, after a moment, passed something back.

Isa nodded in thanks. Then, just before she turned away, Regulus saw how her gaze flicked to James’s. Their eyes locked, both of them stiff, unreadable.

Then Isa turned on her heel and walked back to their table as if nothing had happened.

Barty, of course, was the first to explode.

“What the *fuck* was that, Nott?”

Evan was just as incredulous. “Yeah, what the hell?”

Barty’s eyes narrowed. “You *friends* with Mudblood Evans now?”

Isa rolled her eyes as she sat back down. “I haven’t heard you complaining about all the smokes you’ve been nicking from me, Crouch.”

Barty blinked, caught off guard. “You buy them from *her*?”

Isa gave him a flat look. “Obviously. You think I can get my hands on Muggle cigarettes in *Slytherin* circles?”

Barty scoffed. “You sure they’re not *poisoned*?”

Isa snorted. “Don’t be so dramatic, Crouch. The girl can use the money and I can use the cigs. My stash from Damascus ran out ages ago.” She took a sip of her drink, then added slyly, “And it came with a nice little bonus last time, right?”

The table exchanged glances, no one quite sure what she meant.

Isa smirked, gaze pointed. “The *spliff*.”

Evan’s jaw practically dropped. “Wait — you got the weed from *her*? *From the Head Girl*?”

Isa’s smirk widened. “I saw her confiscating it off a Hufflepuff. I gave Evans a *very* fair price.” She leaned back in her chair, looking pleased with herself. “And apparently, she can use a Galleon or two for her plans after Hogwarts.”

Evan and Barty were still staring at her, completely dumbfounded. Regulus, on the other hand, simply smirked at the scene. The girl was *sly*.

Isa pushed back her chair again. “More drinks?” she asked, already heading for the bar with Melania.

As soon as she was gone, Evan let out a low whistle. “Nott’s a *bloody menace*.”

Yes. It was a *very* good thing Isa hadn’t been sorted into Gryffindor.

*****

Considering he was in the same room as the person he had recently tried to punch the living daylights out of — and who had returned the favour — and the bloke whose heart he had broken — and who had broken his in turn — the afternoon was going rather pleasantly.

Of course, it helped that Regulus had strategically positioned himself at the table, his back firmly turned to the dangerous corner of the pub. Out of sight, out of mind.

What he hadn’t accounted for, however, was that at some point, everyone needed to use the loo and that by stubbornly ignoring that particular dangerous corner of the pub, he had failed to consider the possibility of a far worse fate — an unforeseen encounter in the

cramped stalls of the bathroom.

Which is then, of course, exactly what happened.

The moment he stepped inside, he *felt* it before he even saw him. Regulus flinched and his grip on the door tightened. Slowly, he lifted his gaze—

James.

Their eyes locked. The world stood still.

Neither of them spoke.

Regulus saw it instantly — the raw ache in James's expression, the hurt that settled deep into the bones. He was sure his own eyes reflected the same.

James swallowed, barely above a whisper.

"Reg."

Regulus gave a small, sad smile. "James."

James exhaled, something faltering in his face. "How are you?"

Regulus opened his mouth, instinctively ready to answer — but then he stopped himself.

No.

They could not do this. They couldn't do it this way.

They had to go through this process of grief — feel it, endure it, let it run its course.

They couldn't mistake the cause of the pain for the relief, only to end up hurt worse. They couldn't keep making the same mistake, again and again, each time cutting deeper.

They had to let the wound heal properly.

Even if that meant letting it scar.

But *fuck* , did he want to reach for him.

To cup his face. To take his hand. To feel his wild hair slip through his

fingers. To kiss his maddingly beautiful, soft lips.

But he didn't.

"We can't do this, James," he said quietly. "We're only making it worse."

James's breath hitched. When he spoke, his voice was barely holding together.

"I know, Reg."

The door creaked open.

Regulus startled.

It was Lupin. He stopped short, gaze flickering between the two of them, sharp and wary.

After a long beat, he spoke, voice careful, low. "Everything alright, Prongs?"

James turned to him, lips pressing together before managing a small, strained smile.

"Yeah," he said. "Thanks, Moony."

He stepped past Regulus while Lupin lingered for a moment, waiting for his friend. James reached the door, then hesitated. He turned, eyes finding Regulus's one last time.

Softly, almost too quietly—

"Merry Christmas, Reg."

Regulus's throat tightened.

"Merry Christmas, James."

And then he was gone.

*****

As always, the Slytherin common room Christmas party was widely considered a raging success. It took less than an hour for everyone to loosen up, the music to get louder, the drinks to spill freely and the makeshift dance floor to fill with Slytherins shaking off their last bit of

school stress before heading home for the holidays.

It didn't take long for Regulus to find the familiar spot at the couch overlooking most of the common room — the packed dance floor in the centre, the cosy seating area on the left and the main drink table on the right.

He took a slow sip of his Butterbeer, watching as Evan and Barty tossed back a shot of Merlin-knew-what across the room.

Then, without warning, someone dropped onto the couch beside him.

Regulus started slightly, turning his head to find a familiar pair of green eyes and sleek black hair.

"Miller," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"Cap," she responded with a small smile. Silence stretched between them. "Look who's sulking at a party now."

Regulus snorted. "I'm not sulking, Miller. Just enjoying some quiet."

She didn't look convinced.

"Not looking forward to the holidays?"

Regulus shrugged. "Not particularly. But I'm not dreading them either. They're the same every year."

Miller tilted her head. "How do you spend Christmas, then?"

"Well, the main event is the Annual Ball at my cousin's estate." His voice flattened. "A long, dull night of excessive dinner courses, far too much liquor, ballroom dancing and an insufferable number of people."

Miller's eyes widened with interest. "That sounds brilliant."

Regulus nearly choked on his drink. Had she *heard* what he said? "Oh, *not at all*, believe me."

She looked like she did not, in the slightest, believe him.

Regulus shook his head. "What about you? What do you do for Christmas?"

Miller shrugged, suddenly looking a little shy. "Just… unwrapping presents with my little brother, visiting my grandparents, having

dinner together. That sort of thing."

Regulus smiled. "That sounds lovely."

She raised an eyebrow. "Yours sounds better."

Regulus could hardly believe his ears. Unwrapping presents with family in a warm house, having dinner with your loved ones — surely that sounded a billion times better than an extravagant, hollow gathering of the people in Britain who deemed themselves way too interesting and important, while actually being neither?

"Believe me, no," he said simply. Then, after a pause, "But I suppose I don't really like big parties."

Miller hummed. "Maybe you're just too serious for them."

Regulus blinked at her. "Miller, are you saying I'm *boring*?"

She laughed — warm, rich and just slightly flushed. "Nooo. But you're… serious. Like, mature."

Regulus stifled his amusement. "That's just another way of calling me boring."

Miller grinned. "No, I just mean — with everything going on, the war, all the bad news and everything, isn't it good to have this? Parties where people can forget for a little while? Just enjoy themselves?"

Regulus considered that. She had a point. Maybe that's why people went all out for these things — to pretend, even for a few hours, that the world wasn't falling apart.

Regulus needed a lot more than a party to forget about the war, though.

The war claimed his dreams, turning them into nightmares of the people whose eyes he had watched go lifeless. Every visit to Grimmauld Place, his parental house, was laced with it. Every waking minute, he carried the knowledge that one day, the war would pit him against the person he loved most. And though no one could see it, thanks to the concealment charm, the Mark on his arm was a constant presence — a dull, unnatural sensation and a constant reminder of the war.

No, a bit of dancing and some nicked liquor in the dungeons wouldn't

make him forget.

Not that he couldn't try, though.

They sat in silence for a while, both watching the dance floor.

At the centre was Isa. She moved with ease, laughter dancing in her eyes as she spun between Amaryllis and Melania. The three of them wove seamlessly in and out of an improvised routine, elegant and full of joy. But Isa was the only one who truly belonged there — in the spotlight, where the light hit just right, catching the loose waves of her golden hair and the shimmering fabric of her green dress.

Regulus caught her eye, and Isa, flushed and breathless, winked at him, a knowing smirk playing at her lips. Something about it — the confidence, the ease, the sheer joy of it all — made the gesture feel almost… sensual.

Regulus, amused, lifted his Butterbeer in a small toast. His eyes twinkled at her cheerfulness.

Miller glanced between the two of them. "She's beautiful," she murmured. "Like, the prettiest girl I've ever seen."

Regulus, still watching Isa, hummed. "Yes. Me too."

Miller hesitated, then, carefully, "Is she your… girlfriend?"

Regulus looked at her, then snorted. "No."

"Oh," Miller said. Then, after a moment, "You'd look good together."

Regulus shrugged, taking a slow sip before returning his gaze to the dance floor. "Yes, that's the general consensus."

Miller fell silent.

After a beat, Regulus added, "Isa and I go way back. Our families run in the same circles. We've practically grown up together. She's my best friend."

Miller nodded, considering that. Then, with an impish glint in her eye, she added, "Bet she'd be an even better girlfriend than a best friend. You could have disgustingly beautiful children."

Regulus turned to her, expression flat. "Miller, have you been drinking?"

She shot him a defiant glare, though her cheeks went pink. “Nooo. I have only had *two* glasses.”

Regulus raised an unimpressed eyebrow. “Who gave them to you? How old are you?”

“I’m thirteen,” she huffed, crossing her arms. Then she glanced toward the edge of the dance floor and nodded. “He gave it to me.”

Regulus followed her gaze.

Evan.

Bloody typical. Getting a thirteen-year old sloshed.

She scanned the crowd again, searching, before adding a bit too casually, “And that other friend of yours. The, um, handsome one.”

He blinked, then let out a sudden laugh. “You mean *Barty*? Barty Crouch?”

Miller’s entire face burned. “…I *think* so. The one with the brown hair.”

Regulus snorted, shaking his head before turning serious again. “But really, Miller, don’t drink anymore. It’s not good for you. You’re too young.”

She rolled her eyes.

“I mean it,” Regulus insisted. “Alcohol is dangerous. Not just for your brain, but for… making decisions you’ll regret.”

She gave him a long look — half exasperated, half fond.

Finally, she sighed. “Alright. I promise I won’t drink anymore if *you* promise to have fun.”

Regulus hesitated. Then, with a resigned sigh, he extended his hand.

“Deal.”

*****

Now, Regulus wasn’t the one to take a joking agreement with Miller too seriously, but she did have a point. Maybe there was something to be said for loosening up a little, for focusing on things that did not

matter. And, if he was honest, the idea of being called boring sat uncomfortably with him — though, deep down, he knew that it wasn't something he could easily change.

So he tried.

He tried to see the fun in all of it. He danced a bit with Amaryllis, but he didn't particularly enjoy it. He joined a drinking game with Avery, Mulciber and Barty until he had exceeded his self-imposed two-drink limit in less than the equal amount of minutes. He struck up conversation with his Beaters only to quickly realise that the Carrow twins, while excellent on the Quidditch pitch, reminded him far too much of trolls to be excellent at anything else.

The joy he eventually found then came from an unexpected source.

He had retreated to a couch again — not the one in the centre of the room, but one tucked near the drinks table, slightly away from the chaos. He was nursing another Butterbeer when Isa flopped down beside him.

"I was looking for you," she said, amused. "It's a miracle you haven't fled to your dorm already."

Regulus shot her a dry look. "I have an agreement with my Chaser to have fun tonight." Then a realisation dawned. "I think I'd have more fun heading to bed, so I might actually do that."

Isa snorted. "Not quite what she meant, I reckon."

Then, without warning, she reached into the front of her dress, slipping her fingers beneath the fabric at her breasts.

Regulus blinked, momentarily thrown. "What are you—?"

A second later, she pulled out a package of cigarettes.

Regulus raised an eyebrow, half confused, half amused at the fact that she held a package of cigarettes in her bra.

Isa rolled her eyes. "Dresses don't come with bloody pockets, Reg. And to think this one was designed by a *woman*. Unbelievable."

Regulus snorted as she flipped open the pack. Nestled among the cigarettes, he instantly recognised something else. A spliff.

A realisation clicked.

The last time Barty, Evan, and Isa had smoked one together, they'd howled with laughter the entire evening.

So… why not?

Regulus leaned back against the couch, tilting his head. "Light it."

Isa blinked. "What?"

"I said — light the spliff, please."

She stared at him, looking somewhere between baffled and amused. "*Right.*"

Regulus sighed. "I'm serious. Let's smoke it together. See if I can manage some 'fun'."

Isa arched an eyebrow. "You? Smoking weed? *Voluntarily*?"

"Yes, let's do it."

She still looked vaguely suspicious, but after a beat, she pulled out her wand and lit the spliff, taking a slow drag before passing it over.

Regulus took it carefully, inhaling.

It hit him instantly.

He coughed — not violently, but enough that his eyes watered.

Shit, this stuff was *heavy*.

Isa, clearly enjoying herself now, watched him with open amusement. "Well then," she said, smirking as she exhaled a slow curl of smoke, "let's have some fun, Black."

*****

Well, fun they had.

Regulus wasn't quite sure when it kicked in, but at some point, everything just… shifted. Sound became strange — either eerily distant or impossibly loud all at once. The music pulsed in his veins, every note almost tangible. His vision sharpened in odd places and blurred in others, like the entire world had been reduced to this couch, this moment, Isa beside him.

And, Merlin, was he laughing.

Regulus Black did not laugh like this. At best, he offered an unimpressed snort and on rare occasions, something funny enough might earn a dry, barking laugh, a sound that seemed to echo with Sirius's voice. No, the only person who had ever been able to make him double over in laughter, tears in his eyes, was James. And Isa occasionally too, but that had been some time ago.

At some point, Barty and Evan had joined them, completely dumbfounded by the sight of Regulus — high as a kite, doubled over in laughter, sitting on the floor next to Isa. Both of them were leaning against the couch, tears rolling down their cheeks as they laughed together. Barty and Evan, utterly baffled, had quickly retreated, afraid to jinx whatever was happening between them.

"Remember when you tried to teach me to fly?"

Regulus groaned, tipping his head back against the couch. "Oh, don't bring that up."

"No, no, let's revisit that," Isa said, eyes gleaming. "Two years before Hogwarts. I was seven, you were eight, and you decided to take it upon yourself to teach me because 'no one associated with a Black should be a disgrace in the air'."

Regulus sighed dramatically. "It was a disaster."

Isa cackled. "A disaster? Regulus, you nearly killed me."

"You fell three feet," he corrected, rolling his eyes.

"Three feet directly into a bloody rose bush," Isa shot back.

Regulus, who had absolutely forgotten that detail, dissolved into fresh laughter. He vaguely registered Evan and Barty sniggering at them from a distance.

Isa eventually exhaled a deep breath, her laughter softening into something more thoughtful. "God, life was so much easier back then. No expectations. No war."

Regulus snorted. "Oh, Nott, there were definitely expectations." He started ticking them off on his fingers. "Speak at least four languages, always sit up straight, don't use the wrong fork at dinner, be an example of your lineage, don't disgrace the family name—"

Isa groaned. “Right. And let’s not forget the bloody Annual Balls.”

Regulus huffed a laugh. “I try to.” Then, tilting his head toward her, “What are your plans for the holidays?”

Isa stretched her legs out. “Damascus for the first few days, then back to the estate in Manchester for the rest.” She glanced at him. “You?”

Regulus sighed. “Black Manor.”

Isa nodded. “I’ll pop by.”

Regulus looked at her, something warm settling in his chest at the sight of his best friend. “You’re always welcome.”

They fell into a quiet sort of stillness, both lying sideways against the couch, their faces close, watching each other. Regulus’s gaze snagged on a stray lock of golden hair that had fallen into her face. Without thinking, he reached out and tucked it gently behind her ear.

Isa smiled — broad and warm and just slightly dizzying.

The silence between them stretched.

Then, quietly, Isa asked, “How are you holding up, Reg?”

Regulus’s lips quirked into something wry. “Alright.”

Isa studied him. “You’re not sleeping much, are you?”

Regulus raised an eyebrow, amused. “Can you tell?”

Isa shook her head slightly, resting against the couch. “No. But the other night, when I slept in your bed, you were restless. Tossing, talking in your sleep.” A beat. “Nightmares.”

Silence.

Regulus’s breath caught slightly. “…You remember?”

Isa hesitated briefly.

“Of course.”

Regulus hesitated. “You don’t have blackouts? You remember the night and… everything?”

Something shifted in her expression — her brown eyes softening, something vulnerable settling in. Almost a whisper, she said, “Yes, Reg. I remember everything.”

Regulus slightly parted his lips, the words forming in his mind but refusing to leave his tongue.

Isa was so close. Looking at him like there was nothing else in the world. And he probably looked the same way at her — because at that moment, there truly was nothing beyond this couch, her shy, brown eyes, and that stubborn golden lock that had somehow freed itself again.

Then—

“Ies! Last song! Come dance with us!”

Melania and Amaryllis.

They both startled.

Regulus blinked, straightening slightly. Isa pulled back, glancing toward her friends who were already tugging her up from the floor. She hesitated for half a second, then shot him a reluctant smile before letting herself be dragged away.

*****

The last day at Hogwarts before the holidays seemed completely normal — just students collecting their last stuff for their trunks, students allowing themselves not to think about homework but instead savouring all the time left with the friends they’d be missing for two weeks.

No, nothing about that Friday seemed particularly noteworthy.

But later — when he looked back on it properly — Regulus would realise that the day had been significant in more ways than one.

He just didn’t know it yet.

Regulus was heading toward the common room before breakfast when two first-years came barreling up the stairs, nearly crashing into him in their haste.

They froze the moment they recognised who they had bumped into.

“S-sorry!” one of them stammered, going pink.

The other swallowed hard, eyes wide. “Really sorry, Black.”

Regulus sighed, unimpressed but not particularly bothered. “It’s alright.”

The boys scurried away before he could change his mind, and Regulus continued on, stepping into the common room to find Amaryllis and Isa already there. Isa had a stack of books under her arm.

He raised a dry eyebrow. “You’re hitting the library before breakfast? On the last day before the holidays?”

Isa snorted. “No. I’m just returning some of my books.”

Regulus nodded, only for Isa to suddenly remember something.

“Oh, which reminds me — Madame Leaf asked me to tell you to return two books before the holidays.”

Regulus frowned. “I’ve already returned everything.”

“She said otherwise.” Isa shrugged. “You know how meticulous she is. Something about a book on Charms and one on the Living Draught of the Dead.”

Regulus vaguely recalled seeing those titles in his dorm and found it odd that he hadn’t really noticed them before.

“Wait up,” he said. “I’ll join you in a bit.”

He found the books exactly where he thought they’d be — tucked away in his wardrobe. *The Art of Charms Beyond the Wand* and *The Living Draught of the Dead: A Study of Experimental Poisons and Countercharms* .

Strange. He hadn’t even realised he still had them.

Shrugging off the feeling, he grabbed them and made his way to the library with Isa before heading to the Great Hall.

The castle was buzzing with excitement — students chattering about their holiday plans, laughter echoing through the corridors. As they walked into the Great Hall, Regulus kept his focus on Isa beside him, deliberately avoiding looking toward the Gryffindor table.

He slid into his usual seat among their friends, reaching for toast and eggs, stirring his tea absentmindedly—

When the owls swept in.

Regulus barely glanced up as his usual morning copy of the *Prophet* landed beside his plate. He unfolded it and—

TWO SUSPECTED DEATH EATERS IMPRISONED IN SWISS FORTRESS

Authorities confirm Dark Mark branding but refuse to disclose names

By Barnabas Cuffe, Daily Prophet

GENEVA — The Swiss Ministry of Magic has confirmed the imprisonment of two individuals in Hohenhain, the country's most secure magical fortress, citing suspected ties to You-Know-Who. In a rare statement, Swiss officials revealed that both prisoners bear the Dark Mark — a symbol branded directly onto their forearms, which they claim is proof of allegiance to the Dark Lord.

This marks the first official acknowledgment of the Dark Mark as more than a mere omen in the sky, raising urgent questions about its nature, its purpose, and whether other followers of You-Know-Who might bear the same mark. (See page 3: "The Dark Mark — What Does It Mean?")

Despite confirming the Mark, Swiss authorities refuse to release the prisoners' names or the precise charges against them. Minister Minchum has formally demanded more information, but sources inside the Ministry say his requests have been flatly ignored. Switzerland's unwillingness to cooperate is seen as yet another consequence of the growing diplomatic strain between Britain and its European allies, many of whom have criticised Minchum for disregarding their warnings about the rise of Dark activity.

For now, the identities of the prisoners — and the true extent of You-Know-Who's reach — remain a mystery.

Isa, who had been reading over his shoulder, instantly went pale.

Regulus turned to her just as she swallowed hard, her hands gripping the edge of the table. He knew exactly what she was thinking.

Her father.

“If it was him, you’d have heard from your mother by now,” Regulus whispered, his voice low enough for only her to hear. His words felt strangely fragile. “Don’t worry, Ies, it’s not him.”

Isa exhaled shakily, a quiet sigh slipping from her lips. “Well, we don’t know that, do we?” she murmured, her voice soft and trembling. “Not until I see him tonight.”

Regulus’s gaze was unwavering as he met her eyes, steady and sure. “I’m sure, Ies. If they’ve already printed it in the paper… you would’ve heard from your mother.”

Isa’s lips pressed together, her eyes flickering with uncertainty. “You really think so?”

“Yes, really.”

She didn’t look convinced.

Regulus couldn’t blame her.

For all his reassurance, something uneasy coiled in his chest. Isa wouldn’t know for sure until she saw her father at home, and Regulus wouldn’t have any answers until their next meeting, scheduled for a few days from now.

And for the first time in his life, the meeting couldn’t come soon enough.

Strange, what curiosity could do to a person.

Chapter 14: Of Royalty & Highness

Chapter Notes

> Thank you all for commenting! And to new readers (well, at least new for me in the comments): welcome. ❤

> Mind the warnings. This chapter has some mature explicit content. 🔥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus had expected the first days of the holidays to be spent in solitude. It was only normal for his friends to be claimed by their families after months apart, and as Regulus generally didn't spend a lot of time with Mother and Father but always opted for Black Manor instead, it meant the start of any break was usually rather solitary.

Mother knew she had done her job — one of her sons was firmly set on the right path. Regulus had the perfect grades, mingled in the right circles, practically had a suitable wedding candidate already and — most importantly — he bore the Mark. Her task was complete. Mission accomplished.

The perk of this was that it granted Regulus an amount of freedom Sirius would have killed for back in the days. Sure, Regulus was well aware that Cissy played a considerate role in this change of policy — urging Mother to consider that repeating past mistakes might drive away her last son, too. But Regulus knew there was another reason why Mother didn't mind having him around so little. He was a constant, living reminder of Sirius and, thus, of all that she had lost. They were nearly identical; the same sharp cheekbones, the same curls, the same grey eyes, the same voice. Only, of course, Sirius had always been just a little bit better. Another painful reminder for Mother of what she had lost.

He had wanted to Apparate straight from King's Cross to the gate of Black Manor, but naturally, he was expected to pay his parents a visit now he was in London. The fact that distance didn't mean a bloody thing in the magical world was just semantics, apparently.

Dinner, as usual, was a dreadful affair. Mother, Father and Regulus each took a side of the table. Mother asked the expected questions —

grades, professors, the company he kept — but none out of genuine interest. Of course it was merely an inventory, ensuring everything was exactly as it should be. Regulus answered as required, strategically omitting a few details. No need to mention that a Mudblood had become one of his closest friends. Or that, for weeks, he had spent every evening after practice with the son of the country's most notorious blood traitors driving into him, moaning his name.

The idea was so ridiculous that it made Regulus snort in his drink.

He looked at his parents — so cold, distant, barely acknowledging each other — and he'd allowed himself to wonder: how had they even conceived him and Sirius?

It meant that they would have been… intimate at least twice in their life.

He could not picture it at all. The idea was utterly inconceivable.

He'd never seen them kiss. Never seen them touch outside of a fight.

No, Regulus could definitely *not* picture them having some romantic night together. God, the idea of Father courting Mother, whispering sweet nothings in her ear, both of them climbing towards some grand level of pleasure. It was completely fucking unthinkable.

They could have done it without love, of course. It could have been done out of obligation. It could have been an emotionless, purely lust-driven thing.

But even that — the thought of Mother and Father *wanting* each other that way.

No. He couldn't imagine it.

And how had both Sirius and Regulus ended up so… different, then?

Sure, Sirius — unlike Regulus — was a bit of a player but Regulus knew for sure that he was warm, considerate and loving with women when it mattered. And Regulus… well, Regulus found it impossible to separate lust from love. Both the people he'd slept with he loved deeply, completely — albeit in very different ways.

Thankfully, his thoughts were interrupted by Cissy's arrival. She appeared during dessert, slipping gracefully into a seat and asking nearly the same questions Mother had — but with actual interest.

And, of course, she made sure Mother heard all the right things. It was no coincidence that she wanted a meticulously detailed account of his grades.

Regulus was glad she was there — not only to break the tension between him and his parents, also because it gave him the opportunity to ask the question that had been on his mind since that morning.

“Who are they? The two Death Eaters captured in Hohenhain?”

Cissy shifted uncomfortably in her seat. The quick glance between her and Mother made it clear that his parents had already been informed.

Her voice was quiet. “Cletus and Rodolphus.”

Regulus’s spoon clattered against his plate. He snatched it back up quickly under Mother’s sharp gaze.

Wow. The Carrow twins’ father and Bellatrix’s husband…

“No way.”

Cissy nodded. “I — I can’t really tell you more. You’ll have to wait for the Meeting on Tuesday evening. But yes — it’s not looking very good for them. Hohenheim is infamous for its policies.”

Father, for once in his bloody life, added to the conversation. “At least three times the number of Dementors compared to Azkaban. And half the size.”

Regulus exhaled sharply. “Fuck.”

Mother’s glare was instant. He coughed. “I mean — unfortunate.”

Well, at least Regulus’s words had turned out to be true — at least Mr. Nott was safe and sound. The thought of Isa losing her father to a prison in Switzerland…

With Cissy present, time seemed to move considerably faster, and soon enough, their tea was finished and Regulus stepped into the green flames with the name of Black Manor on his lips.

*****

Regulus was pleased to find that this holiday for once didn’t start in solitude. Not that he minded being alone — because he didn’t — but Black Manor was large and quiet enough as it was, even when friends

visited and filled it with life.

Barty and Evan were staying the entire weekend. Mrs. Rosier was busy in Paris — something about an art gala — so she had no opportunity to claim and coddle her only son. Barty, on the other hand, wouldn't leave for Germany until Tuesday, which meant he had a few days to bridge. Days he much preferred spending at Evan's rather than alone in his cavernous family home, because his father was rarely there. And though Barty tried to mask it with his usual bravado, Regulus knew he would have chosen to be with his ill mother over aimless nights spent drinking and playing games at Black Manor. It must have been another bloody bitter pill to swallow that he was stuck waiting for his father's schedule to allow him to go there.

The weekend passed in a comfortable haze of sleeping in, playing games, drinking and eating an inhuman amount of snacks. On Saturday evening, Avery and Mulciber popped by and they had played poker until well past midnight, the table covered in knuts, sickles, some galleons and expensive bottles of liquor.

Now, on Monday evening, Regulus found himself in the kitchen with an even larger group. Evan, Barty, Avery, Mulciber, Dolohov and Rabastan were all there, taking up every available chair and surface. He felt a twinge of sympathy for Rabastan regarding his brother, but he couldn't offer more than a wry smile in the current company.

They had spent the afternoon as they usually did — drinking, playing games, passing the time. Barty and Evan were leaving that evening — Barty heading off to Germany and Evan returning home now that his mother was back — so they had ordered Whiskerley to make her famous crisped chicken tenders that last evening. They were too impatient to bother with the dining room, opting instead to eat the mouthwatering, perfect tenders right there in the kitchen.

Barty and Evan were perched on the countertop, lazily swinging their legs as they ate. Antonin and Rabastan sat on high bar stools while Avery and Mulciber leaned against the counter, plates in hand, throwing jabs at each other between bites.

"No, no, but listen," Avery was saying, waving a chicken tender for emphasis. "If you actually knew what you were doing, Dimitri, you wouldn't have lost half your money on Saturday."

"That's rich, coming from the idiot who bet his last sickle on a bluff," Mulciber shot back.

"It was a calculated risk."

"Yeah? Well, your calculations are shite."

Regulus snorted, taking a bite of his own food, but before he could chew, movement in the doorway caught his attention.

Isa.

She stood in the doorframe, dressed in a flowing blue gown and a matching hat perched at the perfect angle. The outfit was utterly out of place among the rest of the group.

She looked beautiful, almost… regal.

"Nott," Evan greeted with a smirk, nodding.

The others followed suit, though Regulus didn't miss the flicker of discomfort crossing Dolohov and Rabastan's faces.

Not eager to have a conversation with Isa while the audience picked apart their every word and motion, Regulus wiped his hands on a napkin, stood and walked toward her. He enveloped her in a hug in the hallway. She was soft against him, smelling faintly of lavender.

Pulling back slightly, he raked his eyes over her, lips twitching. "You're looking… monarchic tonight."

Isa burst into laughter. "Yes, I know. I just had dinner with the British ambassador to Syria in Damascus. Thank the Lord I got out of the desert by volunteering to babysit Ariadna and Elara."

Regulus arched an eyebrow, glancing around. "And where are Ariadna and Elara, then?"

Isa snorted. "With Sable, of course."

She hesitated for a moment, then sighed, shifting at her feet. "At any rate, I can't stay long. Only an hour or two. But—" her gaze flickered toward the kitchen "—I see you have company already, so I'd better come back another—"

Before she could finish, Barty and Evan suddenly materialised beside them.

"Ah, Nott," Evan drawled, smirking. "Looking ravishing."

Barty grinned. "Yes, my queen, shall we bow?"

Isa rolled her eyes but looked amused despite herself. She swatted at them both.

Evan shoved her away playfully. “We were just heading out. So no need to feel like you're intruding."

Regulus frowned. "You're heading out?"

Barty nodded, biting his lip as if holding back a laugh. "Yes, actually. All of us are leaving."

Regulus glanced toward the kitchen, where the others were finishing their last bites, pocketing their wands.

"Why?"

Barty, struggling to keep a straight face, shrugged. "Oh, well. Places to be and all that."

Regulus shot him a suspicious glare. He knew perfectly well what they were doing.

The question was — *why*?

One by one, the rest of them emerged from the kitchen, moving toward the entrance hall.

"Until the next one, Black."

"See you tomorrow, Black."

Isa and Regulus exchanged a slightly irritated look — they could at least have been subtle about it.

"Well," Isa said, rolling her eyes. "I suppose I’ll stay for an hour or two then. But only if I can get out of this pure hell of a dress."

Regulus let out a quiet laugh, his gaze drifting over the high collar, the rigid bodice, the layers of embroidered fabric. It did, in fact, look like pure hell.

"There’s probably some clothes left in the room you stayed in over the summer," he said.

Isa nodded, already turning toward the staircase. "Yes, but you’ll have

to help me out of this ridiculous thing. Mum's explicitly forbidden me from using magic to undo it. Apparently, it's some extortionately expensive—" she waved a vague hand, "*something*."

Regulus followed as she walked up the grand stairs, his hands in his pockets, watching the way the heavy fabric shifted with each step.

"And how exactly does one open a dress like that?" he asked, his voice laced with dry amusement and actual curiosity.

She shot him a flat look over her shoulder. "You'll see."

They reached the bedroom. It was the same one she had stayed in with Barty and Evan — the evidence still littered about in the form of stray clothes and that bloody guitar Barty had insisted on jamming on all summer.

Isa stepped inside and moved toward the standing mirror, her reflection eyeing herself with mild irritation as she reached up and gestured to the back of her dress.

"All yours," she said.

Regulus lingered in the doorway, arms folded.

"C'mon, Reg," she urged. "Help me get out of this thing."

Regulus blinked, as if shaking himself from a daze. Pushing off the doorframe, he crossed the room, coming to stand behind her. Their eyes met in the mirror. Something in his chest tightened, but he ignored it and set to work.

And well, *hell* was an understatement.

The dress was fastened at the back with nearly thirty sets of laces, each one tied into a minuscule knot. Knowing Mrs. Nott, they were functioning as a corset.

Why she couldn't just put her daughter in a simple zip-up dress was one of life's great mysteries.

Regulus swallowed and lifted his hands, finding the first lace. It was small, wound tight beneath his fingers. Carefully, he loosened the knot, unwinding it to reveal the first sliver of bare skin beneath.

The air in the room shifted. The silence was thick, heavy. It made him uncomfortable.

Regulus cleared his throat. "So…" His voice came out lower than expected. He latched onto the first thing that came to mind. "How was your dinner?"

Isa let out a sharp, unamused huff. "Dreadful, obviously. I've only met the man twice, and he's already given me the creeps."

Regulus freed another lace. Another inch of skin.

"Why's that?"

Isa's gaze flickered in the mirror, something wry in her expression. "For the obvious reasons."

Regulus paused, his fingers stilling for a moment before moving to the next lace.

"Ah," he murmured, understanding dawning. He tugged the tie loose, slow, precise. "Spent the evening gawking at you?"

Isa averted her gaze. Her nod was stiff, barely perceptible. "Yes."

Regulus let out a quiet snort at the audacity. "In the company of your father? That's not even brave anymore — that's just plain stupid."

Isa's lips curled slightly. "Yes, well, it always happens when my father isn't looking, doesn't it?"

Another lace undone. Another inch of skin.

Regulus exhaled through his nose. "So, what did you do to him?"

Isa blinked, turning her head slightly as if she hadn't heard him right. "What?"

He smirked faintly. "Don't tell me this man has been shooting disgusting glances at you all evening and you've left that table without striking back?"

A mischievous glint flickered in Isa's eyes. "Well… yes."

Regulus tilted his head slightly, waiting.

Isa exhaled, a slow smirk forming. "I might have… accidentally… spiked his dessert with laxatives."

There was a beat of silence — then Regulus let out a sharp burst of

laughter. Isa followed, hers less incredulous but just as loud.

Regulus shook his head, still laughing.

Again — it was a mercy she wasn't sorted into Gryffindor. The thought of her mind anywhere near Sirius and James was nothing short of terrifying.

Isa smirked, eyes alight. "Serves him right. Mum actually sees these things happening, you know. She always tells me to just 'keep my head down' and not make life difficult for my father or cock up some deal. But really, that pervert had it coming."

Regulus hummed in response, undoing another lace.

"And they're all like this?" he asked, his voice quiet but clear in the stillness of the room.

As long as he could remember, Isa had been looked at, wanted. At first, it had been boys their age — awkward, harmless stares, and, since they were children, more out of awe than anything else. But as they grew older, the range of men changed. And with that, the gazes sharpened, taking on something darker.

She was the embodiment of beauty feeling like a curse.

Isa tilted her head slightly. "What do you mean?"

Another lace undone. Another inch of skin revealed.

"All your father's associates — are they all like this?"

Isa snorted mirthlessly. "Most *men* are like this. Everywhere, all the time."

Regulus glanced up at her reflection, his hands stilling briefly before moving to the next tie.

"Even women," Isa added.

His brow furrowed. *What*?

Isa let out a dry laugh. "Not *like that,*" she clarified, reading his thoughts with ease. "They just assume I'm spoiled, obnoxious, brainless."

Regulus didn't respond immediately. He let the silence stretch as he

worked at the next lace, his fingers methodical and slow, for he could not risk ruining this ridiculously expensive dress.

“Well,” he murmured eventually. “Sometimes…” He undid another tie. “Sometimes people are too overwhelmed by beauty to see past it.”

Their eyes met in the mirror.

“It takes up the whole room,” he explained, voice quiet. “So they don’t bother crossing it. So they don’t see what’s behind it.”

The silence that followed was thick and charged and Regulus wasn’t quite sure what to do with it. He was glad that Isa broke it.

She smiled. “You sound like Nana. She might’ve used those exact words, actually.”

Regulus let out a low laugh. “Normally, I’d take offence at being compared to an elderly woman. But your grandmother was wicked, so I’ll take it as a compliment.”

Isa laughed, tipping her head back slightly. “As you should.”

The silence returned, heavy but not as uncomfortable. Regulus worked another lace free.

“Thankfully, there are exceptions, of course,” she pointed out. Then, softer: “You, for example. You see other things.”

Regulus undid another knot.

He was suddenly struck by the urge to explain how that worked; to explain that seeing ‘other things’ didn’t cancel out the beauty — that they could, in fact, exist together.

He didn’t look up.

“Doesn’t mean I don’t think you’re beautiful, though, does it?”

Isa’s breath hitched.

Regulus lifted his gaze, their eyes locking in the mirror. His voice was lower, quieter.

“Because I obviously do. Because, naturally, you *are*.”

Regulus became acutely aware of how close they were standing —

close enough that his breath ghosted over her bare shoulder, close enough that he could see the fine, golden downy hairs at the nape of her neck.

His fingers brushed against her skin just above the curve of her lower back.

Isa stilled.

Goosebumps broke out across her skin. He saw them, felt them. He heard the sharp inhale of her breath.

Their eyes met again in the mirror. Hers were deep, dark, unreadable.

He felt the sudden, desperate urge to lighten the moment, to cut the tension as soon as possible.

“I mean,” he said suddenly, his voice light, casual, “one of my earliest memories of you is watching you leg it behind the shed to escape Cissy and Sirius after a particularly brutal prank.” He paused. “No — I saw you immediately for the menace you are.”

Isa burst into laughter, the weight in the air dissolving instantly.

Regulus took a step back, the final lace undone. Her back was bare now, and she lifted the front of her dress, holding it against her chest to keep herself covered.

"Alright," he said, clearing his throat. "When you’re done, come to the kitchen. You *have* to try Whiskerley’s chicken tender."

Then, without another word, he turned and walked away.

*****

On Tuesday evening, Regulus walked down the dimly lit hall to the meeting room at Bellatrix’s house and, surprisingly, he felt almost… numb. It was as if his curiosity had dulled the usual dread that seeped into his marrow whenever he stepped out of her fireplace.

He wasn’t early, but not late either — exactly how he preferred it. Not early enough to be trapped alone with the Dark Lord and Bellatrix, not late enough to have every eye in the room turn to him as he entered.

When he stepped inside, Lucius, Bellatrix, Yaxley, Mr. Nott and the Dark Lord were already seated.

Of course, the Dark Lord sat at the head of the polished table, fingers resting lightly against the wood, his gaze flicking up as Regulus entered. The others turned as well, offering instant greetings.

“Regulus,” Lucius greeted smoothly.

He gave a curt nod in return before taking a solitary seat near the edge of the room. The others arrived in quick succession — the group was bigger than ever before. There were more than twenty people. They were clearly growing.

Regulus tried to stay invisible, keeping his head down and greeting only Dolohov and Rabastan as they slipped into their seats next to him.

Then, without a word, the Dark Lord straightened and the room fell silent.

“You will be aware,” he said, voice smooth, “that two of us have been… detained.”

Regulus’s gaze flickered to Bellatrix. There was something resentful about her expression. Whether it was concern for her husband or disappointment that her husband had cocked it up, Regulus couldn’t tell. Perhaps both — but more likely, just the latter. Bellatrix did not mourn things she deemed weak. And Regulus doubted she cared much for her husband in the first place.

“We will return to that in due course,” the Dark Lord continued, his tone dismissive. “Only those relevant will be informed.”

A flicker of interest rippled around the table — sharp eyes, hungry expressions. Some were clearly wondering who would be given the honour of hearing this precious information, of perhaps handling the situation, even.

Regulus felt like he, Dolohov and Rabastan were the only ones not positively delighted at the thought of being included into this. But then again, they were younger. And Regulus was, of course, the youngest of all.

“For now, we turn our attention to expansion.”

A murmur of approval rippled through the room. The Dark Lord’s gaze swept over them, sharp, assessing.

“We are gathering new recruits,” he went on. “Strong blood. Capable minds. We need those with influence in the Ministry, those with access to information, those who have proven themselves.”

He began to list names. Some were Ministry officials, some were men who had been working abroad, some were well-positioned in business. Regulus listened carefully, committing details to memory.

Then—

“We may also use… other means.” The Dark Lord’s voice took on a new, almost sneering quality. “Half-breeds.”

The reaction was immediate. Some in the room shifted, a few — Bellatrix the loudest — let out scoffs of disdain. Others looked intrigued, as if weighing the advantages.

The Dark Lord gave a slow, cruel smile. “They have their uses. Cast aside by the Ministry, they carry grudges. They are eager to serve anyone who offers them *anything*.” He paused. “They are tools. Nothing more.”

Regulus’s mind suddenly snapped to Lupin.

The only half-breed he had ever known.

Did Lupin know? That people spoke of him like this? That in many rooms, someone like him was despised? That in rooms like this, he was nothing more than an object, a creature to be used?

Of course, Lupin had been fortunate. He had met James and Sirius instead of men like Yaxley and Dolohov. A stroke of sheer luck — being sorted into a dorm with the least bigoted people in the world.

What a fucking lottery ticket.

Regulus shoved the thought aside, forcing his mind back to the table, pushing past the pang of pain at the thought of James.

Bellatrix scoffed, cutting through the murmurs. “If we’re going to align ourselves with filthy half-breeds, I don’t want them anywhere near my house.”

Lucius let out a low chuckle.

The Dark Lord only smiled. “That is your right, Bellatrix. But I believe we will have to find another… location regardless.” His gaze swept

the room. “We are growing. We will need more space.”

The conversation moved on. Regulus kept his expression carefully composed, offering nothing, taking everything in. As usual, he didn’t take on an active role but simply listened.

Until the Dark Lord turned to him.

“Regulus.”

He felt his stomach tighten as the weight of every gaze in the room shifted onto him. He straightened, nodding once.

“I believe there are several students at Hogwarts eager to join us?”

Regulus cleared his throat. “Yes. There are at least five in Slytherin waiting to join. Three will graduate this year, two the year after.”

The Dark Lord inclined his head slightly. “Their names?”

Regulus kept his voice level. “Dimitri Mulciber, Bertram Avery and Severus Snape are graduating this year.”

At the mention of the first two names, the Dark Lord gave a slight nod. “Yes, well. We know Avery and Mulciber. Their fathers stand with us. They were unable to join tonight, but they will be present next time.”

Interesting.

“And Snape?” the Dark Lord mused. “That is a name I do not know.”

Regulus didn’t hesitate. “He’s exceptionally talented. Especially in spellcraft and potioneering.”

“Good,” the Dark Lord murmured. “A skill we always have use for.” He let the thought linger for a moment. “And from your year?”

Regulus’s eyes flickered towards Mr. Rosier before he answered, “There’s Evan Rosier.”

Regulus caught the gleam of satisfaction in Mr. Rosier’s eyes.

“And,” Regulus continued, bracing himself, “Barty Crouch.”

Bellatrix let out a delighted laugh. “Ah yes. *Crouch’s son.*”

Regulus ignored her. “He’s on our side. Fervently.”

The Dark Lord hummed in amusement. “The son of the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.” He tilted his head slightly, his lips curling. “He will be of great use to us.”

A sharp pang of unease twisted in Regulus’s gut.

The meeting continued, shifting between discussions and strategies, until finally, they were dismissed. Regulus rose with the others, eager to leave — to go home, to eat something and read a book.

But just as he turned to go, the Dark Lord’s voice cut through the room.

“Regulus.”

He paused.

Of course he was being asked to stay behind again — it didn’t even surprise him anymore.

It did still unsettle him, though, so it was with a feeling of utter discomfort that he was left there, just the two of them.

Again, it was no surprise that the Dark Lord didn’t really seem to want anything from him. He just complimented him on his contribution to the meeting and — strangely so — wished him good holidays.

Regulus wasn’t sure what was more unnerving — the compliment or the pleasantry. Either way, he was relieved when he was finally dismissed.

*****

It was the next day — just two days before the horrendous Annual Christmas Ball at Dreadmoor Keep — that the tension finally reached a boiling point.

Regulus wasn’t stupid and he wasn’t oblivious either. He’d felt it simmer for weeks. Had felt the change, the shift, the way in which things suddenly seemed to be charged with something. The way Isa had looked at him in his bed, in the dorm — her eyes so piercing, laced with something unnervingly contemplative…

You really are, though, Reg. You really are pretty.

And the Slytherin Christmas party. The way she had danced, her eyes locked onto his. How they both had laughed, draped across the floor against the couch. How Regulus had forgotten about all the heartache for a while, the world simply not existing beyond that couch and his best friend.

And her goosebumps when he had untied her dress. The same goosebumps that, for some reason, kept haunting his dreams.

Regulus sat on the sofa in his bedroom, the only light coming from the lamp on the side table. He had started a new book that morning — for it was the first day of the holidays so far he had been alone and free to read — and was completely immersed by it, one arm propped against the armrest, the other clutching the book. He was so immersed, in fact, that he didn't register the presence of another person in the house — not until the door creaked open and Isa entered the room.

Regulus looked up.

Now, Isa surely was a person of fierce emotions — she always felt things outwardly and unapologetically. Regulus always thought that was one of the reasons they worked so well as best friends, for Regulus could perhaps feel as deeply as she did, but he preferred to keep emotions inward. To press them down and bury them deep.

And well, it made for a nice balance.

Regulus knew Isa well enough though to register that the intensity with which she entered was unusual, that something was different now.

Her gaze was sharp and determined, her golden hair spilled down her back in waves, slightly tousled, and her eyes were brimming with emotion — though Regulus had a very hard time placing what emotion specifically.

She was dressed in a skirt and a jumper and there was something… wild and purposeful in the way she carried herself. A slight blush coloured her cheeks and her breath came just a little too quick, like she'd hurried to get here.

Regulus finally closed his book, watching her warily. His voice was low, cautious. "What's up, Ies?"

It didn't go past him that she hadn't yet looked him in the eyes.

That is — until she stood firm before him, her eyes locking into his. The room seemed to shrink.

“Reg,” she started, her voice low and firm. “The other day… you told me you think — you think I’m beautiful, right?”

Ah. He’d had a feeling that that particular moment in front of the mirror might come back at some point.

Regulus tilted his head slightly, setting the book aside. He cleared his throat, something about her gaze making him shift in his seat.

“Well, yes,” he said, his voice carefully even, not entirely sure where this was going. “Obviously.”

He leaned forward slightly, searching her face, trying to decipher the emotions burning behind her eyes.

But she gave him nothing except a set of determined, fierce eyes.

She didn’t break her stare.

“Okay,” she said slowly. “So you agree I’m beautiful. And I think you’re handsome. That means we both find each other attractive. Right?”

Something uneasy curled in his stomach.

Where was she going with this?

Regulus parted his lips, then closed them again, unsure what answer she was looking for. When he finally spoke, it was a little stiff, his voice catching just slightly.

“Yes,” he managed. “We both find each other attractive.”

Regulus felt like Isa’s eyes stripped him completely bare, peeling him apart layer by layer.

“Okay,” she said again, her voice quieter this time, almost thoughtful. “So we find each other attractive. We’re best friends. Have been best friends for years. We know each other better than anyone.”

Regulus swallowed, still frozen in place.

She gave him a pointed look.

“So we’re… comfortable with each other.”

Silence.

Regulus nodded, still visibly confused. *Of course* they were comfortable with each other. They’d been friends practically their entire lives.

But Isa wasn’t done.

“And when we… slept together. We—” she hesitated for only a fraction of a second, but Regulus caught it “—we both liked it, didn’t we?”

Now Regulus was alarmed.

His pulse quickened, a sharp jolt of unease running through him. Slowly, deliberately, he reached out and placed the book onto the side table next to the lamp, giving her his full attention.

“Well, yes,” he admitted carefully.

His mind flickered back, unbidden, to that moment in the dormitory. That was hardly a question that needed answering — the way she had clenched around him, moaning his name, how he had buried his face in her neck… They hardly needed more evidence than that, right?

He shot her a wary look, voice cautious. “I think we’ve established that, haven’t we?”

He was utterly, completely confused.

Why was she asking all these questions — questions to which they both already knew the answers? And why did she find the need to bring up things like them sleeping toge—

Oh.

Oh.

Realisation settled in.

He suddenly had a *very* good idea of where this was going.

His first instinct was to call her out on it — to push her to say it outright, to make her spell it out in clear words so there could be no mistaking her intentions. But before he even had the chance, Isa did a

rather good job of that herself.

“Okay,” Isa said, her voice stronger now, more resolved. Her gaze pinned him down, her eyes burning into him with an intensity that made his chest tighten.

“Have you ever considered doing it again?”

The air in the room shifted.

Regulus’s breath hitched. His concern deepened, his brain working too fast, trying to find the right response. Was this a trick question? Was there an answer he was *supposed* to give? Was what he *thought* was happening *actually* happening?

He leaned forward slightly, opened his mouth, then closed it again. When he finally spoke, his voice had dropped, rough with caution.

“What’s going on, Ies?”

Isa didn’t answer. Instead, she held his gaze for a moment longer — one heavy, charged second — before moving.

Swiftly, decisively, she climbed onto his lap.

Regulus tensed instantly, his pulse hammering, the heat of her body pressing against him so suddenly it knocked the breath from his lungs.

She aligned her gaze with his, so close now that he could count every fleck of brown and gold in her irises. Her lips barely parted, her breath warm against his skin as she leaned in, voice dropping to a whisper.

“Have you ever considered doing it again?”

A shiver ran down his spine.

Goosebumps erupted across his skin as the warmth of her breath caressed his ear.

His throat turned dry and his heart pounded erratically against his ribs. The scent of lavender wrapped around him.

She pulled back just slightly, her forehead almost touching his, her breath fanning across his lips. He felt something coil deep in his gut.

Regulus couldn’t answer. He was completely lost for words.

Completely overwhelmed by her closeness. Couldn't think past the staggering reality of her body pressed into his.

He found himself caught between the urge to come closer, to close that unbearable, torturous inch between them, and the sensible caution to break away, to put space between them and stop whatever the hell was happening there.

Isa decided for them.

Her gaze never wavered as she lifted a hand, brushing a stray curl out of his face.

Regulus swallowed hard, barely breathing, utterly transfixed.

He could see every detail of her face — the few freckles dotting her nose, the slight flush creeping up her neck…

And then—

Then she crossed the line.

Her lips met his — soft, warm, wet and completely shattering every thought.

Regulus's hands hovered at her waist, the urge to push her away battling with the need to pull her closer.

The kiss deepened. Isa's tongue swept over his, a gentle tease before their tongues started to fight for control. Regulus won the battle with a small bite to her bottom lip.

She gasped — soft, breathless, delighted.

The sound snapped him back to reality — and to sensibility — in an instant.

"Ies—" his voice was hoarse, breaking between kisses, "we shouldn't — what's going on—"

His sentence was cut off pathetically when she moaned against his neck, the vibration of it shooting straight through his body.

Regulus shut his eyes but couldn't stop the sharp shudder that wracked through him.

Her lips trailed down, pressing soft, teasing kisses along the sensitive

skin of his throat, then lower, then—

She bit his earlobe.

Regulus inhaled sharply, all restraint left in him — not much in the first place, in all fairness — now snapping.

His grip tightened. One hand found her waist, firm, holding her in place. The other slid up, fingers curling around her jaw, tilting her head back just enough for his lips to find her neck.

He kissed, sucked. He bit down just slightly — just enough to make her gasp. She moaned again and *fuck* — his body reacted instantly.

It was an utter, *utter* shame that he wasn't wearing his thick robes but instead his pyjama trousers, the light fabric doing absolutely nothing to hide the fact that every single drop of blood in his body was pooling south at the sound of Isa's moans.

He'd heard that sound before — during that night in his dorm — and he *knew* how vocal she was and how completely disarming the sound was to him. He felt a flash of embarrassment for getting turned on so clearly — for the fact that his ragged breath, his blown pupils, the unmistakable hardness pressing against her gave away that he needed so little to want her, to desire her.

Though, giving credit where credit was due, the way she was rolling her hips into him was downright sinful.

Every last thought in his head dissolved. Every rational, sensible reminder that this was Isa, that they were best friends, that she loved Davies and he loved James — and that this was a complete, catastrophic recipe for disaster… It all simply disappeared.

"Don't you want me, Reg?" she whispered, her voice edged with desperation.

Regulus's chest rose and fell in uneven breaths. Of course he wanted her — wanted all of her. Wanted her to move faster, harder. Wanted to taste every part of her body, hear every sound that he could draw from her lips, wanted to feel her around him.

Fuck.

"I do," he admitted eventually, his voice hoarse with desire.

How was he to resist her? How was he to say no to her, with her moving like that in his lap, her voice hot and begging in his ears, her lips warm and pleading against his neck?

How was he to turn her down while she gave herself to him in full, complete surrender?

Isa shifted, stripping off her tights and pulling her jumper over her head, leaving herself clad in nothing more than her skirt and her bra. Regulus swallowed, his eyes drawn to her smooth skin around her collarbones, the delicate slope of her shoulders, the lace of her bra perfectly outlining her breasts.

His hands itched to touch her, to trace every inch of exposed skin.

But then her lips were on his again — feverish, hungry — her mouth wet and moaning as she kissed him, teasing, demanding. Her fingers worked at the buttons of his trousers, deft and impatient, and without so much as a thought, before he could even process what was happening, without even taking off any more of his clothes, she lowered herself on him.

Regulus's head fell back against the sofa with a deep, guttural groan as she began to move.

The sensation was instant. Raw. Overwhelming.

Isa rode him with urgency, her hips rolling relentlessly, her breath shaky and uneven. Her eyes locked onto his, burning with emotion.

Regulus's mouth parted, breathless, a shuddering groan slipping past his lips as he gripped her hips.

Fuck, *fuck* — at this pace, he wasn't going to last.

He reached for her, cupping her face with gentle hands, kissing her deeply in an attempt to slow her down.

But Isa was relentless — her movements purposeful, desperate.

Every motion, every gasp, every sweet, intoxicating moan that spilled from her lips sent sparks through his veins, making it harder — impossible — not to just give in completely.

Yet, somewhere through the thick haze of desire and seduction, the realisation cut through him that this moment — that *she* deserved

more than this. That she deserved to be cherished, to be touched with devotion. Not this — not something hurried and desperate, still half-clothed, lost in urgency rather than deliberate adoration.

No, Isa deserved to be made love to reverently, every inch and sensitive spot of her skin deserved to be mapped and worshipped.

“Ies,” he moaned, voice rough, but his words were swallowed by another kiss.

No — this wouldn’t do.

Regulus gripped her shoulders gently, hands firm as he held her still, still buried inside her, stopping her movements completely.

Silence.

Neither of them moved.

Isa’s breath was ragged, her eyes locked onto his, something uncertain flickering there — something insecure and shy.

Regulus cupped her face, his thumb brushing over her cheek as he tucked a strand of golden hair behind her ear.

“Slow down, Ies,” he whispered.

She blinked, her lips parted.

His lips ghosted over the shell of her ear, his voice barely above a murmur. “You’ve got me,” he reassured her. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Isa exhaled shakily, her hands gripping his shoulders.

Then, without warning, Regulus moved — shifting beneath her, pulling her closer as he stood from the sofa, lifting her effortlessly with him, still inside her.

Isa gasped, then yelped in surprise as he carried her.

And when he laid her down onto the bed, a sound escaped from her lips — a soft, beautiful giggle.

Regulus froze.

Because in all the years he had known her — after all this time — this

was the first time in his life he had ever heard Isadora Nott giggle.

And well, apparently there were two — two sounds made by Isa that disarmed Regulus completely.

Her moans — unfiltered and sensual — like a prayer calling upon all deities and all things divine, bringing them all to their knees. And her giggle, warm, rich, a melody so perfect it made the most beautiful orchestra pale in comparison.

Regulus laid her down carefully, their bodies never parting as he reached down, peeling off his shirt, then pushing his pyjama trousers down, the fabric pooling at his feet.

His movements were slow, precise — completely different from the rushed, frenzied motions from before.

Isa watched him, her lips slightly parted, her expression unreadable.

Regulus didn't rush and instead looked at her. His eyes trailed over her face, taking in every detail — the way her hair fanned across the pillows, the deep rise and fall of her chest, the flush across her cheeks.

Isa shifted, clearly a bit shy under his gaze.

Regulus reached for her, brushing her hair away from her face, tucking it behind her ear to grant himself full access to her lips and her neck.

And then, with exquisite slowness, with deep, languid strokes, he moved.

*****

The rest of the night was a haze.

A fevered, breathless haze.

One mind-blowing blur of syncing bodies, desperate hands and delighted gasps. They drifted off in intervals, only to wake and find each other again — hands roaming, lips seeking, bodies tangling in the dark. No part of Isa's skin was left unexplored by Regulus's mouth — his lips tracing a path from her collarbone to her thighs with devotion. Isa tasted all of him in return, her tongue wicked, teasing, until the blood in his veins was replaced by sparks of pleasure, thrumming and surging through him.

A blur of skin and warmth, lost in a limbo — a place where thoughts ceased to exist, where desire drowned out everything else. Where want eclipsed reason. Where pleasure erased consequences. Nothing beyond the sheets mattered. Nothing beyond Isa's breathless gasps, the tremor in her voice against his ear, the sight of her golden hair spilled across the pillow as he moved inside her. Regulus let himself be consumed, let himself be completely overwhelmed by it — let it swallow the ache, the longing for that one person who held both his heart and his soul, if only for a night.

And by the time dawn finally arrived, and they both fell asleep one last time, the unease — the quiet nagging voice that warned this could go wrong — was barely a whisper. Faint, almost forgotten — like it had never been there at all.

No, somehow, in the seconds before drifting off, his mind went to his brother. To the last Christmas Ball Sirius had attended almost exactly two years ago, to the words he had spilled. The words meant to tease, but that had somehow turned prophetic.

" But, still, you'd either have to be the world's biggest liar or the biggest poof if you said you haven't once thought about doing her."

"Or, in your case — make sweet, passionate love to her for hours on end."

Chapter End Notes

Oh Reg, poor lad — has no clue when he's being seduced.

So, well, that happened...

For the (secret, slight) Isa/Reg-shippers: you're welcome.

For the rest: your time will come, I promise. And you know, who laughs last...

The next chapter will come on Thursday. Very curious what you guys think.

Chapter 15: Of Dances & Balls

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for your comments and kudos! ❤

This is a long chapter (10k+ words). I seriously considered splitting it in two but then decided against it because the weight's mostly in the second part and it will ruin the chapter schedule. So well, enjoy the two chapters in one ;)

Also for this chapter, mind the warnings. 🔥🔥🔥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Regulus woke up the next morning, his mind immediately went exactly where he had forbidden it to go the night before. With everything cooled off, the haze of the deep night lifted, everything was suddenly horrifyingly clear.

Well, *potential catastrophe* crossed his mind in an instant.

He sat up. Then immediately flopped back onto the pillow with a long, suffering groan.

They should not have done this.

They should *not* have done this.

All these years, they had made sure never to cross this line. That one time in his dorm last year had been out of necessity and nothing else. They had never crossed the line willingly, never crossed it *voluntarily*.

And there was a bloody good reason for that.

This sort of thing ruined even the strongest friendships. There was a reason why friends didn't do this.

Regulus groaned again.

Except — he had enjoyed it, hadn't he?

Flashes of memory flickered through his mind.

Isa between his legs, looking up at him, her eyes brimming with emotion. His hands gripping her hips, pulling her back against him,

the way she gasped his name into the pillow. His own laughter when he'd summoned Whiskerley to bring them chicken wings at three in the bloody morning — and how Isa had shrieked, diving under the duvet, mortified at the idea of his House Elf seeing her like that.

Yes. They'd had one hell of a night.

And what now?

Fuck. This was why *he* didn't do this. This stuff was for lovers. For people you—

James.

Another muffled groan into the pillow.

He turned his head slightly, now lying flat on his stomach, eyes scanning the room. Isa's clothes were still scattered about, so she was probably downstairs eating breakfast. Perhaps she was freaking out, too.

Was she freaking out too?

Because, really, it had been rather premeditated — she had literally ambushed him. She had asked that question—

Have you ever considered doing it again?

She had Flooed over with a plan.

And yes, fine, it took two to tango — but she had very clearly been the one to lead him into the dance.

And now that they'd danced the dance — what did that mean?

Isa was his best friend. He loved her, but like a friend. They had spent years dismissing everyone's suggestive remarks about their relationship, had defied society's assumptions that a girl and a boy couldn't be *just* friends.

And now here they were.

Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck*.

Isa and her rolling hips.

Her *damned* rolling hips.

And what did it mean — what did it mean that the dance had been so good? Although the night in his dorm had already given him a solid idea of what it was like to sleep with Isa, last night had been even better. They had been looser, more confident, less tentative. It had been *good*.

But no. Regulus didn't do this.

He didn't know how to distinguish between lust and love, so he saved his lust for the one he loved.

And that wasn't her.

Although he *did* love her. But not like that. Not the way he loved James. Not in the way everyone wanted him to love her — the one meant to be the foundation of marriage — the marriage they'd almost certainly be forced into at some point.

Regulus groaned again.

His mind was about to tip into full-blown overdrive, teetering on the edge of a spiral, when the door creaked open.

For a split second, he considered it a mercy — at least it would distract him from his thoughts.

Then he turned his head — and immediately took that back.

Because it wasn't Isa standing in the doorway. It was Cissy.

Fuck.

Regulus lay there, completely frozen. His brain short-circuited. His body refused to move.

He was too overwhelmed, too dumbstruck to talk her into going downstairs or to simply ask her to leave and at some point — he wasn't even sure how — she just… crossed the room and sat on the end of the bed.

Oh, *no*.

Regulus, who was currently *completely* starkers under the covers, barely managed to stifle the sheer horror crawling up his throat.

The room was littered with evidence of the very recent events — his trousers in a crumpled heap beside the bed, Isa's skirt and knickers

near the sofa, the scent of sweat and whatnot still hanging in the air.

God, even Selwyn with her single working brain cell, would be able to piece together what had happened here.

And yet, somehow — miraculously — Cissy seemed completely oblivious as she smiled and launched into a bloody conversation.

“Hi, Reg! God, it’s already noon and you’re still in bed?” she chirped, pulling her legs up onto the mattress like this was a casual Sunday visit. “I just wanted to check on you. They might need an extra hand surveilling this afternoon, so I thought perhaps you — I don’t know if you have any plans?”

Regulus just stared at her in panic.

His stress was so intense it was numbing his senses. He could barely hear her — it was like listening through water.

It took Cissy a moment to notice he wasn’t answering.

She frowned, tilting her head. “Reg?”

Regulus’s voice was small. “Yes, sure, Cissy.”

Cissy gave him a vaguely wary look. Then—

The sound of the shower running.

Regulus winced, rubbing his temples.

Of course.

Cissy’s head snapped toward the bathroom door. Her mouth fell open slightly, eyes filled with a mixture of curiosity and unholy amusement.

“…Reg?”

Regulus let his head drop backward. “Yes?”

Cissy’s gaze slowly scanned the room.

The mess of clothes, the empty space beside him in bed, the fact that he was clearly gripping the blanket very tightly.

Regulus could see the moment it all clicked.

She pressed her lips together, clearly trying very hard to suppress her smirk. A muscle in her cheek twitched.

Then, after a beat—

“Reg,” she said, voice laced with a strange mix of discomfort and far too much amusement. “Are you… naked?”

Regulus let out the deepest sigh of his life, feeling his entire face heat up.

“Yes.”

Cissy practically launched herself off the bed, laughing.

Then, as another thought hit her, she paused.

“Wait. *Isa*?”

Regulus groaned into his pillow. “Who else?”

Cissy barely managed to stifle her laughter. “Sorry — I really shouldn’t have barged in like this.”

Regulus lifted his head just enough to give her the most suffering look humanly possible.

Cissy bit her lip, trying so hard not to burst out laughing again.

“I mean, you’re practically of age now, so you’re—”

Regulus’s stomach dropped. He knew exactly where this was going. He was one hundred percent sure he’d die of sheer mortification if she said it out loud.

“No, no, Cissy — don’t—”

“You are a *man* now—”

Regulus made a sound so deeply despairing it could have summoned a dementor.

“I mean, *clearly* you’re a *man* now.”

Cissy was beaming.

“Come over to Bellatrix’s in an hour, alright?” she said, still smirking.

Regulus buried his face in his pillow. “Yes. Sure. Fine.”

"Fabulous!"

And with that, she left the room, shutting the door behind her with a final *thud*.

Regulus lay motionless.

Surely, *surely* this bloody room was jinxed. Never, *not once*, had he woken up next to someone — be it naked or not — without someone barging in.

Fucking hell.

*****

The moment Cissy left, Regulus let out a breath and climbed out of bed. The sheets were a mess, twisted and tangled, a mocking reflection of his thoughts and feelings. He tried not to think about the strong scent of lavender in the room.

He grabbed his wand, yanked a dark grey jumper and a pair of black trousers from the wardrobe and strode out of the room barefoot, heading straight for Sirius’s old bedroom. He needed a long, cold shower and some privacy.

Once inside, he turned on the water and braced his hands against the cool tile, letting the hot stream pound against his back.

It had been a mistake.

His fingers curled against the wall as flashes of last night flickered behind his eyelids. Isa beneath him, Isa above him, the warmth of her breath against his neck, her eyes...

Something twisted in his gut — a disturbing mix of heat and guilt.

With a sharp inhale, he turned the tap. The water turned ice-cold in an instant, shocking his system, chasing away the heat and guilt in his veins. He stayed under the freezing stream until his skin was numb and his thoughts felt less like they were spiralling.

He stepped out, tugged on his jumper and trousers and dried his damp curls with his wand. He quickly walked out, making his way through the corridor.

As he reached the top of the stairs, he hesitated. He could hear movement from his bedroom — Isa getting dressed. Regulus swallowed hard and walked faster, taking the stairs two at a time.

He entered the kitchen and realised he was far from hungry. He did need some caffeine, though, if he was going to surveil the entire afternoon.

Besides, he needed something to do, something to keep his hands busy.

Regulus strode over to the counter, grabbing the kettle and filling it with water. He reached for the coffee tin, his fingers moving on autopilot, scooping grounds into the French press while his mind refused to be here.

There was no reason for this — no reason to be this tense, this skittish.

It wasn't as if he had made a fool of himself — not in the practical way.

No — Isa had enjoyed herself. She had enjoyed every minute of the previous night thoroughly. He'd made sure of it.

Regulus prided himself on not being selfish. And if Isa's very vocal appreciation last night had been anything to go by, he had done a marvellous job.

No, he hadn't made a fool of himself, but that didn't mean it hadn't been foolish.

He exhaled slowly, staring at the dark coffee grounds. He knew he'd have a hard time acting normal now that Isa had seen every part of him, touched every part of him, tasted all of him. Now that she'd seen him in every state.

Regulus winced. Why couldn't he be more like Barty?

Barty wouldn't have this problem. He'd be all confidence and smugness, stretching lazily, completely unbothered. He'd already be flirting, already thinking about coaxing the girl into another round, perhaps even right there on the kitchen counter.

Regulus hated that he wasn't more like that. That he couldn't just enjoy the moment without analysing it to death. That he couldn't just feel something without his brain picking it apart.

Footsteps.

He heard her before he saw her — cautious, hesitant, padding softly across the old wooden floor.

Regulus kept his back to the room, pretending to focus on the coffee, his hands steady even though his pulse was anything but.

Isa didn't say anything at first. He could feel her presence behind him, lingering, unsure. Then, finally, in a voice quieter than usual—

"Hi, Reg."

Regulus glanced up, offering a small, fleeting smile before turning back to pour the boiling water.

"Hi."

Silence settled between them as he reached for the mugs. He could *feel* her eyes on him, watching him closely.

Then—

"Are you freaking out?"

Regulus stiffened. His grip on the kettle tightened slightly.

"No," he said, too quickly. Too stiffly.

Isa let out a breath, unimpressed.

"You're freaking out."

Regulus sighed, still busying himself with the coffee, pouring two cups with meticulous precision. The silence stretched again, thick and tense. Finally, he turned around and slid a mug toward her, avoiding her gaze.

It wasn't until he glanced up — *really* looked at her — that he faltered. He'd expected her to be firm, undeterred — gearing up for a monologue on why he shouldn't be freaking out.

But instead, she looked… uncertain. Small.

Her hands wrapped around the warm mug, her fingers tracing the rim. She hesitated, then, so softly it was almost a whisper—

“Was… was it not good?”

Regulus froze.

Was she *fucking* kidding?

A groan left him before he could stop it, and he dragged a hand over his face before dropping heavily into the chair across from her.

“*Ies* —” he exhaled, voice bordering on exasperated. He shook his head, rubbing his temple. “How could you *possibly* think I didn’t enjoy last night?”

He’d slept with her *five times*. Five bloody times in a row.

How was this still a question?

Isa looked relieved, but then, before he could even brace himself, she pinned him under a sharp, knowing stare.

Regulus groaned and leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling.

“But you’re freaking out,” she stated.

Regulus made a vaguely undignified noise. He couldn’t do this right now. He needed to process. If he talked about it now, if he said something too raw, too unfiltered, he might say something that set her off. Something he couldn’t take back.

Pushing himself up from the chair, he grabbed his wand. “I have to go.” His voice was clipped, and he hated it. Hated himself for it. “Cissy popped by — I need to go.”

Isa blinked. Her lips parted slightly, like she was about to say something, but Regulus had already turned away.

He knew he was being awful. Isa deserved better. She deserved at least breakfast, deserved at least a conversation, a reassurance that she had been wonderful, that this wouldn’t affect their friendship.

But he couldn’t. He was, in fact, very much freaking out. He couldn’t do it. He needed to process first.

Besides, he wasn’t quite sure whether he could make that promise — the promise that this wouldn’t affect the friendship they had spent more than a decade building.

So he walked out.

*****

Regulus Flooed to Bellatrix's, set on one thing — *not* thinking about Isa and instead focusing on the mission, on what he'd be surveilling today.

No. He would *not* be thinking about Isa. Not about her breathless gasps in his ear. Not about her nails in his skin. Not about the smell of her hair.

And he would *not* be thinking about James either. And about the fact that if James knew — knew what had taken place, what had happened between Regulus and Isa — his heart would be in a billion pieces.

Yes, they weren't together, there was no future there. They both knew that. But that wouldn't stop it from feeling like a knife to the back or a nasty back-stabbing jinx.

And, frankly, with all the time Regulus had spent reassuring James — swearing up and down that his relationship with Isa was strictly platonic — he couldn't even blame him for feeling betrayed.

No. Only thinking about the mission. *No* thinking about James. *No* thinking about Isa.

Unfortunately, the universe had other plans.

The first thing he registered when stepping into Bellatrix's meeting room was that, miraculously, neither Bellatrix nor the Dark Lord were present.

The second thing he registered, though, was the undeniable presence of Mr. Nott — leaning against the wall, arms crossed, very much waiting for him.

Regulus winced.

He sucked in a deep breath.

Of course.

Of course he had to be teamed up with Isadora Nott's father after spending the entire night inside her.

He froze. Blood drained from his face.

He forced himself to swallow and clear his mind. To keep a straight face. There was no need to make this awkward. The man had no idea what his daughter had been doing last night.

At least, *he* didn't.

The rest of the room, however, was another story entirely.

Regulus let his gaze sweep across the others — Lucius, Cissy, Yaxley — and it became painfully clear that all of them knew exactly what he'd been up to the night before.

Cissy, standing elegantly near the fireplace, was visibly suppressing a smirk at his stiffness.

Yaxley was sprawled lazily in his chair. "Ah, Black," he drawled. "You look a bit tired."

Regulus's jaw locked while Lucius, though equally amused, shot Yaxley a warning look.

If Mr. Nott noticed any of this, he didn't let it show. Instead, he simply inclined his head. "Afternoon, Regulus."

Regulus coughed. He hated the way his voice came out just a fraction higher than normal.

"Good afternoon," he managed, before his voice went even smaller — *humiliatingly* smaller — "We're… surveilling together? You and I?"

Yaxley outright *sniggered*.

Lucius, exasperated, shot him another glare before answering smoothly.

"Yes. You and Magnus will be heading to the warehouse. Security is tightened, so it should be an easy affair."

Regulus nodded, still feeling disturbingly pale.

Mr. Nott straightened. "Well," he said simply. "Let's get to the Apparition point, then."

With that, he turned and strode from the room. Regulus hesitated — just for a second — before following.

As he stepped through the doorway, he risked one last glance back at

the room. Yaxley was still sniggering while Lucius looked quietly amused. Cissy had bitten her knuckle to keep from laughing outright.

Regulus shot them a murderous glare before turning on his heel.

*****

Surveillance was, indeed, a quiet affair.

Apparently there was now a schedule, ensuring that Revolutionaries only had to surveil once a week, allowing them time to balance their other tasks, maintain their cover and continue with work. Originally, Rodolphus had been assigned to surveil with Mr. Nott this afternoon. But, well — since he was currently locked up in Switzerland, they had asked Regulus instead.

At first, it was uncomfortable.

Regulus sat stiffly at the small wooden table in their observation room, pointedly avoiding Mr. Nott's gaze. The older man sat across from him, smoking a cigar, his posture as always effortless, perfectly at ease. Regulus, by contrast, felt his own movements were too rigid, his glances too fleeting.

There was just something unsettling about him.

Mr. Nott wasn't unkind — never to Regulus anyway, not in the slightest even — and he was deeply charismatic. A bit too charismatic, to be frank. He was the sort of man who commanded a room without effort, who had women swooning the moment he entered, who other men admired and sought counsel from, hoping to emulate his success.

But Regulus, being Isa's best friend for so many years, knew the dark stuff that lay behind the façade of charm and poise.

He knew he ruled with an iron fist at home. He wasn't abusive or violent or anything like that, but his word was law and he had ensured that no one under his roof would ever stand against him. Regulus also knew that Mr. Nott had never been faithful to Isa's mother — that he had carried on affairs for years. No, monogamy wasn't for Magnus Alaric Nott.

Besides all these things, Mr. Nott knew too much. He was too knowing. He knew too much about Regulus's past. And although that conversation Regulus and Isa had overheard in the library in Damascus had shown Mr. Nott to be very compassionate to Regulus,

Regulus had a hard time accepting that his probable father-in-law knew such deeply private things about him.

And well, there was the thing with Davies.

Mr. Nott would have killed an eighteen-year-old bloke in some black magic ritual for falling in love with his daughter. The memory of Thorne's words resurfaced, chillingly apt.

"Call me a foolish romantic, if you must, but yes — I found it a rather gruesome end for Davies, just for loving someone."

Regulus didn't even want to consider the sheer volume of blood on Mr. Nott's hands. It was probably pooling at his ankles in waves.

And yet, despite all of that — he was also just Isa's father. A man Regulus had known his entire life. A man who had always been warm and welcoming to him and Sirius, who had hosted them at his estate in Manchester more times than he could count. The man with whom Isa constantly clashed — but also the man she loved most in the world.

So, Regulus swallowed the slight unease and allowed himself to be drawn into conversation.

And, truth be told, it was rather easy to be engaged. Mr. Nott always had something insightful to say, a unique perspective to offer. He was easily one of the most knowledgeable people Regulus had ever met — fluent in six languages, an expert in the Dark Arts and frighteningly well-versed in the intricacies of magical psychology.

Which only made it all the more baffling that, for a man so knowledgeable, so learned — he did such a poor job at being a decent husband and an unconditionally loving father.

Their conversations spanned a variety of topics. They discussed Mr. Nott's business associates in the Middle East and how increasing security restrictions across several nations might affect his work. They spoke of Mrs. Nott's latest endeavours in the Levantine art world. Politics, naturally, were a focal point — Mr. Nott speculated on the fate of Minchum's administration as the Revolutionaries gained momentum.

And, of course, Rodolphus and Carrow's imprisonment came up as well.

Mr. Nott didn't offer much beyond what Regulus already knew — tight security, the presence of Dementors, the rumors of interrogations, the torture.

Regulus hesitated, debating whether to press the issue — to outright ask what they planned to do about the imprisonment — when the decision was suddenly taken out of his hands.

Because the Dark Lord arrived.

Regulus and Mr. Nott both rose to greet him, offering the proper formalities. Then, the Dark Lord turned his full attention to Mr. Nott. They stepped into the large warehouse, leaving Regulus alone in the small observation chamber.

Regulus remained seated, silent, watching them without watching them — his gaze flicking subtly between them, studying their interaction.

Eventually, through the window, he caught sight of Mr. Nott stepping outside, pacing the perimeter of the building, cigar still in hand, his movements slow and deliberate.

That was when the Dark Lord returned to the chamber for — once again — a brief, simple check-in that unnerved Regulus way more than it should have. And then, just as quickly, the Dark Lord was gone.

Mr. Nott returned shortly after, carrying two fresh cups of coffee, setting one in front of Regulus before sitting back down.

The older man looked contemplative. He swirled his coffee slightly before remarking, "He seeks you out often, doesn't He?"

Regulus met his gaze.

So he *hadn't* imagined it. It *was* odd.

All these times the Dark Lord had singled him out — not for orders, not for anything particularly important, just… to speak. To ask questions that meant nothing. To check in.

It was strange.

He was too afraid to share his unease, though — Merlin knew whether Mr. Nott would pass Regulus's discomfort on to the Dark Lord.

And Regulus knew perfectly well that he had to feel honoured by the privilege of the Dark Lord's attention. Regulus just generally didn't like attention — not from anyone. But well, for the Dark Lord, he'd have to suck it up.

"Yes," Regulus finally answered.

Mr. Nott didn't press further. Instead, he gave a curt nod, as if the matter was settled, and moved on — to a rather unexpected topic.

"I meant to tell you," he said, catching Regulus's gaze. "Vivienne and I expect you to escort Dora to the Ball."

Regulus froze.

He was *not* comfortable discussing Isa with her father. Not after last night.

"Your parents expect it as well," Mr. Nott continued smoothly. "You will arrive together from our estate and you'll be seated with us during dinner."

Regulus forced himself to hold Mr. Nott's gaze, mustering every ounce of restraint to keep his expression neutral. To not avert his eyes. To not let even a flicker of emotion betray him.

He gave the only acceptable response.

"Of course. I'll be honoured."

Yet, his throat felt dry.

It wasn't the first time — they had arrived together last year as well — but back then, they had been seated with his parents, not with the Notts.

Being seated at the woman's parents' table, *her* family's table, was significant. A silent declaration, a forerunner of something more official. It was how the world knew what would be coming eventually.

And well, whatever Regulus decided to do in response to the previous night, ignoring her wasn't an option anymore. It wouldn't have been a nice option anyway — and one very hard to execute seeing Isa's stubbornness — but well… he'd rather have not done it out of choice than out of necessity.

Mr. Nott seemed utterly oblivious to Regulus's internal turmoil.

Completely unaware of what had taken place in Regulus's bed the night before.

At least, that was what Regulus thought.

He was proven otherwise when Rosier and Dolohov arrived for the evening shift, ready to relieve them.

Mr. Nott remained seated as they entered, glancing briefly at the two newcomers before turning back to Regulus. "I'll be staying another hour or so to discuss a few matters," he said. "You're free to go."

Regulus nodded, rising from his seat. He moved towards the exit, making his way to the large hall, about to step outside to Apparate—

"Regulus."

He halted mid-step.

Mr. Nott's voice had been smooth, even. But something about it made the hairs on Regulus's arms prickle.

He turned back.

Mr. Nott stood there, a small smile on his lips — but his eyes… his eyes were dark, deep, burning with an intensity that was decidedly not friendly.

Regulus swallowed.

"I know," Mr. Nott said, his voice quiet, deliberate, "that since you were children, you have always worshipped the ground Dora walks on."

Silence.

"As you should," he added, sharp like the snap of a blade.

Regulus said nothing, his throat dry as parchment.

"Still—" Mr. Nott's gaze bore into him. "If you hurt her, you'll wish you hadn't been born."

Regulus felt the words settle in his bones.

So he *did* know. He *knew* about last night.

And Regulus knew, with absolute certainty, that this was not an empty threat. Davies's fate was proof enough.

It was a very clear warning.

Heat crept up Regulus's neck at the thought of Isa's father knowing what had happened between them, the things they had done.

He fought the blush, forced himself to nod — stiff, composed, controlled.

"I know," Regulus said. "I won't."

He was very aware, though, that this was a promise he wasn't sure he'd be able to keep.

*****

With an irrational sense of dread curling in his gut, Regulus adjusted the cuff of his sleeve one last time, pocketed his wand and made his way to the fireplace in the Entrance Hall.

He had already endured an hour-long ambush from Cissy in preparation for the ball. She had tamed his hair and fussed over his robes until every fold and detail was immaculate.

Mr. Fywell — the family tailor — had, of course, outdone himself. The dress robes were exquisite, cut from the finest fabric, a deep black embroidered with silver. Beneath them, he wore a midnight blue waistcoat which, Regulus was fairly sure, was selected by Cissy to match the colour of his eyes. The same deep blue echoed subtly in the delicate pattern of his fitted trousers and when Regulus had looked in the mirror, he knew that Mother would be satisfied.

Cissy had pretended her visit was merely an escape from her mother and aunt and although Regulus knew that Aunt Druella and her sister — Evan's mum — in preparation of one of the biggest annual events was its own special brand of torture, he knew her well enough it was hardly the only reason she'd Flooed over. And, truth be told, even if he *hadn't* known her well enough, the insufferable number of questions about Isa had been a dead giveaway about her real intentions.

He didn't give her much — only that they were not together and that whatever she had walked in on wasn't a regular affair. That hadn't stopped her from making and endless series of remarks about how

they'd inevitably marry one day and how this was only a natural progression in some greater scheme of things — remarks that only added to the ever-growing anxiety that had been mastering him for the past two days and she now, miraculously so, managed to make worse.

Regulus knew that by walking out of Isa during breakfast it was now up to him to seek her out, but he hadn't. He knew it was probably the lowest thing he'd ever done and that she deserved better, but he just… couldn't.

But well, there was no avoiding it now. He could hardly skip the ball, and as he was expected to escort Isa, he found himself hovering before the fireplace for an unreasonable amount of time.

He exhaled sharply, straightened his shoulders, and stepped forward into the fireplace.

Unlike the Notts' estate in Damascus — which he had visited for the first time two summers ago — Regulus knew their home in Manchester well. The manor was vast, an expanse of pristine stone and iron-gated grounds that stretched far beyond the main house. The architecture was old and stately, with towering windows and grand staircases, every detail made to illustrate just how wealthy the Notts were.

The Entrance Hall was no less impressive — high ceilings, pale marble floors polished to a gleam and a series of ancient family portraits lining the walls, all looking at Regulus in anticipation, making him utterly uncomfortable.

He barely had any time to dwell on that, though, as suddenly he was practically tackled, two smaller figures crashing into him at full force.

He staggered slightly but managed to keep his footing, startled but smiling as he realised what had happened.

Ariadna and Elara clung to him, both dressed in beautiful gowns, their brown eyes bright with excitement. They were strikingly similar to Isa — they both had the same golden hair, the same brown in their eyes. Still, although Elara was very identical in features, she was more reserved, a tad shy. Ariadna, however, was the perfect younger version of Isa in literally everything — sharp, witty and entirely unbothered. Regulus was certain that Mr. and Mrs. Nott occasionally wondered whether they had been playing with a time-turner when looking at their youngest daughter.

Ariadna was already mid-monologue about the Christmas sweets he had gifted her when Regulus noticed something.

They were wearing gowns.

This meant they were attending the ball.

The realisation sent an unexpected wave of relief washing over him for there would be more people at the Notts' table than just him, Isa and her parents.

The guilt that followed that thought was immediate, but he shoved it aside just as quickly.

"So," he said, dragging a hand through his hair — an act that would have given Cissy a heart attack after all her tiring work on it — "where is everyone?"

Ariadna scoffed, flipping her hair over her shoulder with all the dramatics of someone twice her age.

"Mum and Isa are upstairs," she said. "Still arguing about Isa's hair."

Regulus snorted, unsurprised. Isa's hair was just another battleground in the everlasting war between Isa's modern ideas and her parents' traditional expectations.

No fight more ruthless than the one between an intricate braid and rebelliously loose hair.

Since it was highly improper for an unrelated man to wander into the sleeping quarters of a household, Regulus decided to wait in the Entrance Hall.

As if on cue, the sound of footsteps drew his attention. He turned to see Mr. Nott striding into the hall, two drinks in hand. Without a word, he extended a glass to Regulus.

Regulus hesitated. He hadn't planned on drinking but declining outright wasn't an option either. His mind was scrambling for a way out when, abruptly, it went blank completely.

Isa and her mother had just descended the staircase.

Regulus's throat went instantly dry.

Isa wore a deep red gown — elegant, fitted in all the right places, and

flowing like liquid silk as she moved. Her lips were painted to match, the rich colour striking against her skin. Her hair was loose, cascading over her shoulders and down her back, a clear victory in her battle with her mother. She looked invisible, untouchable.

Regulus groaned inwardly.

Their eyes met.

Even after knowing Isa nearly all his life, Regulus had a hard time reading her expression. Still, the unmistakable, clear part in her gaze was the quiet challenge; something unbothered yet deliberate, as though daring him to look away first.

Regulus exhaled sharply.

Then, without breaking eye contact, he downed the Firewhiskey in one go.

This was going to be a *long* night.

*****

Regulus did a surprisingly excellent job at ignoring Isa — especially considering he escorted her through the iron-wrought gate of Deadmoor Keep and spent the entirety of dinner seated beside her.

Normally, he would have Flooed directly into the estate. Being his uncle's nephew, Regulus was privileged to use the fireplace, something only reserved for direct family members. But now he was arriving as part of the Nott family, that privilege was lost and he had to suffer through the full formality of the entrance and — even worse — the horrifying photographers. Regulus winced at the thought of James seeing some ridiculous picture in the Prophet of Isa on his arm.

Up ahead, Mr. and Mrs. Nott led the way, Ariadna and Elara walking at their sides. The moment they stepped through the gates, bright flashes erupted and cameras clicked furiously as they made their way along the stone path leading to the grand entrance.

As expected, Elara shrank from the attention, practically hiding in her mother's shadow. Ariadna, on the other hand, lit up, beaming at the cameras like they had come for her and her alone.

Regulus let out a quiet snort.

Catching his reaction, Isa met his gaze, equally amused.

They smirked at each other, then silence fell again.

Isa glanced at him. “Still in the freaking-out phase, I see?”

Regulus shot her a sharp look. “I told you — I’m not freaking out.”

Isa’s expression made it abundantly clear just how unconvinced she was.

“You know you can’t ignore me forever, right?” she said, her tone mildly exasperated but not unkind.

Regulus sighed inwardly. He knew she was right. Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t keep ignoring her; their lives were too tangled, this evening being a perfect case in point. And he had seen the challenge in her eyes when she had descended the stairs earlier — a silent warning that Isa would go to whatever lengths necessary to pull him out of his shell. And once Isadora Nott set her mind on something…

Still, he wasn’t about to make it too easy for her.

Regulus turned to her, meeting her gaze. “Try me.”

There was no real bite to his words, and Isa smirked.

As they neared the cluster of photographers gathered near the entrance, Isa extended her arm toward him.

Regulus sighed.

“Can’t let the world forget we’re meant to be married off to each other, Reg,” she quipped, her voice dry with amusement. “Father wouldn’t want any bloke getting the wrong idea. I’m expected to ‘guard my chastity’, after all.”

Regulus thought of Isa only nights ago — and how chaste had been the very last word to describe her.

He snorted, linking his arm with hers. “Bit late for that, don’t you think?”

Isa scowled.

Regulus couldn’t suppress the satisfied smirk curling at the corner of his lips as they stepped inside.

*****

Inside, they were immediately ambushed by Aunt Druella and Cissy, along with several House Elves offering drinks on silver trays.

Across the room, Regulus spotted Amaryllis and Melania making a beeline for Isa — Merlin knew how girls managed to find each other so quickly in a crowded hall. But then again, Isa stood out; she was the most beautiful woman in the bloody room by miles.

It granted Regulus the perfect, long-awaited opportunity to slip away and find Evan. Unfortunately, neither he nor Evan had the kind of beauty that commanded a room's attention, so it took him at least fifteen minutes of dodging well-wishers and sidestepping conversations before he finally spotted him. Just as he reached him, the chime of a bell rang through the hall, signalling the start of dinner in the enormous dining room.

"Reg," Evan greeted, giving him a quick once-over before nodding approvingly at his attire.

Regulus barely had time to respond before a firm clap landed on his back, nearly making him lurch forward. Barty.

Regulus blinked, caught off guard.

"Black," he drawled.

Regulus was about to ask him about his presence — Barty was supposed to be in Germany with his Mum, after all — when people all around them moved to the dining room, forcing them along.

Dinner, as expected, was exquisite. Platters of charmed dishes floated across the table: roast pheasant glazed in firewhiskey, enchanted, shimmering pastries and goblets brimming with the finest wine.

Naturally, Mr. Nott kept pouring Regulus generous glasses of the red liquid that he was unable to dodge. The only upside of this was the fact that it deeply frustrated Isa who had been limited to a single glass by her father. She scowled deeply everytime Mr. Nott poured him a glass.

Regulus's victory was short-lived, though, for the moment no one was watching, Isa stole his glass and downed it in one go, the smirk she shot him afterward far more victorious than his had been.

Dinner was fine. He was grateful that the little Nott girls were at the table. Ariadna kept up a steady stream of conversation that spared him awkward silences or conversation with Isa. Glancing toward the other side of the room, he spotted Mother and Father seated with Aunt Druella and Uncle Cygnus. Regulus realised that he found himself actually glad to be sitting here instead.

As dinner neared its end, the room buzzed with laughter, goblets being refilled as people moved between tables, a clear indication that the meal was wrapping up and that soon, they'd be heading to the ballroom.

Regulus's gaze flickered to the far end of the table, where Mr. and Mrs. Nott were engaged in quiet conversation with Cissy and Lucius.

Isa leaned in beside him, exhaling a dramatic sigh. "Ran into Crabbe and Selwyn before dinner," she said, her voice laced with challenge. "They spilled their drinks all over themselves at the sight of me."

Regulus arched a slow brow. He knew exactly what she was doing. He knew perfectly well that she was just trying to rile him up.

But he had grown up with Sirius *and* Mother, so he had a lifetime of experience in dealing with people trying to provoke him and — more importantly — not letting it get to him.

He shot her a flat look, though the flicker of amusement in his eyes betrayed him. "You must be honoured," he said dryly. "Being ogled by two half-trolls."

Isa bit her lip, clearly stifling a smirk, before schooling her features into an expression of cool indifference. "Ah well," she mused, slowly leaning over to grab Regulus's glass before swirling the last of his wine. "Corban Yaxley has already reserved a dance with me."

She paused just long enough to make it deliberate. Then, tilting her head ever so slightly, she downed the glass in one go. "Perhaps I'll find out if he's talented in more departments than just dancing."

Regulus stilled.

Oh, she was *good*. Every bit as skilled at this as Sirius and Mother.

Still, he knew exactly what cards to play in order to win.

"Well," he mused, "when the time comes, will you be calling him

Yaxley?" He leaned back in his chair, smug. "Or will he earn the privilege of his first name the way I did — repeatedly — two nights ago?"

Isa's breath hitched.

A flush crept up her neck, staining her cheeks in a way that had absolutely nothing to do with the wine.

Regulus's smirk deepened, victorious.

Before she could recover, before she could fire back some cutting retort, Mr. and Mrs. Rosier passed by, sweeping them into polite conversation.

Regulus turned to greet them, but not before casting Isa a sidelong glance — one that told her, quite clearly, that he had won this round.

*****

Despite being secretly entertained by Isa's antics during dinner, Regulus did continue his mission of ignoring her the best he could. This wasn't an easy task, considering both Cissy and his so-called friends seemed hell-bent on maneuvering them into the same space every chance they got.

Still, Regulus was Regulus, so miraculously, he managed to avoid dancing with her all evening. Instead, he occupied himself with lingering at the bars, engaging in easy banter with his friends, duelling with Dolohov and Rabastan in the duelling area, and generally hovering at the edge of the dance floor — stealing the occasional glance at Isa. Whether he did so to ensure Corban Yaxley didn't wander within a few feet of her was naturally beside the point.

It was already later in the evening — no children in sight, most adults beyond tipsy and the room buzzing with laughter and heavy with the scent of wine — when Regulus found himself standing at the edge of the dance floor with Evan, both nursing their drinks.

Regulus spotted Barty at the bar across the room, laughing about something with Dolohov and Rabastan. Regulus watched him for a beat and carefully weighed his words before finally addressing the issue that had been on his mind all evening.

"So," he asked eventually, "when did Barty get to yours?"

Evan took a sip of his drink. “Yesterday morning.”

Regulus glanced at him, slightly taken aback. “So he’s not celebrating Christmas with his family at all?”

Evan hesitated. It was brief, but Regulus caught it.

“Well…” Evan exhaled. “His mum was officially hospitalised yesterday. They’ve sedated her.”

Regulus stilled. A sharp pang of pity and shock shot through him.

“Did something… out of the ordinary happen?”

Evan sighed, swirling his drink. “Yeah. I think they found her wandering again.” He paused. “Barty wanted to take her to London but Mr. Crouch had her hospitalised instead.”

Silence stretched between them.

They were both thinking the same — Mr. Crouch was too afraid to take his wife to the psychiatric ward of St. Mungo’s, instead preferring to hide her away somewhere in southern Germany, minimising the risk of her damaging his reputation and career.

A strange sense of disgust settled over him.

Regulus turned his glass in his hands. “How’s Barty?”

Evan snorted. “Not speaking about it, obviously. But it shows. You’d better wait for him to bring it up — if he ever does.”

Regulus nodded. “Noted.”

Before anything else could be said, Barty sauntered over with an air of smugness and confidence, perfectly masking what had been happening in his life over the last few days.

The three of them stood there for a moment, drinks in hand, watching the dance floor.

Unfortunately — but not surprisingly — Regulus’s gaze eventually landed on Isa.

She was dancing with her father. They were both exquisite dancers, moving effortlessly through the room, each step precise, each turn seamless. Of course, Isa stood out — graceful, unbothered, the red silk

of her gown flowing like water around her. And, as usual, she seemed entirely indifferent to the fact that nearly every pair of eyes in the room had landed on her at least once

Regulus had been staring longer than he realised — because the next thing he heard was Barty's voice, far too close to his ear.

"Well, well," Barty mused, throwing an arm around him. Regulus startled slightly. "I'd dare say that Nott is looking rather pretty tonight."

Behind him, Evan sniggered.

Regulus shot Barty an unimpressed glance, thinking that 'rather pretty' was, frankly, doing her appearance an offensive amount of injustice.

"Don't let Warrington hear your words of praise, Crouch," he said flatly.

Barty just laughed, unbothered. "Oh, please. I'm not the one undressing Nott with my eyes."

Evan choked on his drink.

Regulus, completely deadpan, took a sip of his Butterbeer. "At least I have taste, Crouch."

Evan and Barty roared with laughter, making it impossible for Regulus not to join in — albeit a bit reluctantly.

Barty was right, of course.

She was beautiful. Regulus had always found her beautiful, but he had now found a different kind of beauty in her. It wasn't just in her golden hair, her charming smile or her full lips, but instead he'd seen it in the shy flicker of her eyes as he'd moved in her, or the incredulous laugh against his neck when he'd touched a certain spot of her body that had been surprisingly pleasurable, or the blush on her cheeks when she'd wrapped her hands around him for the first time.

Regulus pointedly pushed down the realisation that it was this kind of beauty — the private, intimate, unguarded one — which he loved most in James, too.

The reason Regulus had been so keen on avoiding Isa all evening

wasn't because he feared it would be awkward — though there was some truth to that — but because he was afraid of the power she seemed to have over him.

It had taken nothing but some breathed words against his ears and some rolling of her hips to make him surrender completely, to have him discard the numerous valid reasons why they should keep their relationship platonic, the immeasurably number of ways in which any kind of intimacy between him and Isa could spiral into a catastrophe.

And now, having been forced to drink several glasses by Mr. Nott and Isa looking like *that*, he simply did not trust himself to come within a few feet of Isadora Nott.

Unfortunately, the universe had, once again, other plans.

*****

As per tradition, at some point, when the level of intoxication among his friends reached a new-time high — and in his opinion, an all-time low — Regulus slipped away and found himself on the hidden balcony terrace, tucked behind the heavy drapery of the ballroom away from the noise and warmth of the party.

He was leaning against the balustrade and let his eyes drift over the view, over the estate's wrought-iron gate on the left and the endlessly stretching sprawling grounds on the right.

He wondered how much longer he'd have to endure before leaving wouldn't be considered rude. He'd have to formally say goodbye to the Notts — he had arrived with them, after all — which entailed at least another half an hour hunting Mr and Mrs. Nott down and exchanging pleasantries before finally being able to slip away.

His thoughts were interrupted by the faint rustle of silk behind him.

He knew it was her before he even turned.

"There you are," Isa said, her voice smooth and a touch playful. "I almost feel like you have been avoiding me."

Regulus exhaled a quiet laugh, glancing at her from the corner of his eye as she moved to stand beside him, her arms settling lightly on the balustrade.

They both knew he had been avoiding her.

Still, he didn't admit it.

"Too many people," he offered instead.

Isa arched a brow, clearly unconvinced, but she didn't argue and merely stifled a smirk.

"Too bad," she sighed, voice laced with something fierce."I would've liked to have danced with you."

Regulus turned his head slightly, his body very pointedly registering the warmth of her upper arm brushing against his, the scent of lavender and something vanilla-like hanging in the air.

He swallowed.

Isa caught his hesitation at her comment and let out a slow sigh.

"So, two nights ago, you slept with me five times in a row, and now we can't even share a dance?" she mused, tone sharp but not unkind.

Regulus winced at the reminder. *Five times*.

He could hear the offense, the accusation in Isa's tone — that it didn't have to be weird at all, but that he was *making* it weird by acting differently. He, after all, always danced with her at the Annual Ball.

"I'm sorry," he offered, nodding. "You're right."

Isa tilted her head. "If you come inside, we could still share that dance."

Regulus, however, although feeling he owed her a dance at least, wasn't particularly looking forward to being surrounded by so many people. Nor was he particularly keen on Cissy's, Barty's and Evan's triumphant smirks as they saw him dancing with her. Not to mention the possibility of cameras catching them.

His gaze flickered back to her. "We could dance here."

Isa blinked.

For the briefest moment, she hesitated, then her lips twitched and she nodded.

Slowly, they turned to each other.

Her hands found his shoulders, settling against the bare skin peeking through the open collar of his dress robes. They were warm, soft. Regulus inhaled sharply. His own hands landed on her waist, fingers pressing lightly against the silky fabric of her gown.

The faint sound of music drifted through — a slow, lazy melody spilling onto the terrace. Regulus took the lead, guiding her into a rhythm — not a formal waltz like they were undoubtedly dancing inside the ballroom, but something slower. The balcony terrace was just spacious enough for him to spin her once, her laughter rich and warm in response. He grazed the bare skin of her back where her dress dipped low. He felt her shiver.

He didn't know when it shifted, but somewhere, somehow, it did.

Perhaps it was when he fully, clearly registered that scent — the floral, vanilla. Or perhaps when her fingers trailed upward, threading into his hair, Regulus's breath hitching in response. Or maybe it was the breath — warm, teasing against his throat — a slow inhale, like she was breathing him in, sending a sharp pull of heat low in his stomach.

At any rate, at some point, her lips brushed the shell of his ear.

And when he turned his head—

Their eyes met.

A million shades of brown and gold flickered in her eyes and Regulus felt his pulse stutter, his grip tightening just slightly on her waist.

Then, her lips found his.

There was nothing hesitant about it. It wasn't a soft, careful, tentative press — it was her upper lip immediately caught between his, the languid slide of tongues, the deliberate pull of mouths meeting and parting, deep and unhurried.

Isa let out a sound — a soft, needy little moan that shot through him with violence.

Regulus winced at the sharp, visceral effect it had on him. He barely registered what was happening as he instinctively flexed on her waist, pulling her flush against him, pressing into the curves of her hips that he had teased, tasted, just two nights ago.

The memory struck him unbidden — flashes of bare skin, breathless gasps, the way she had said his name — and suddenly, restraint became a precarious, razor-thin thread.

His breath came heavier. His head spun. He was about to lose every ounce of self-restraint left when he, just as quickly, all of a sudden, snapped back to the present.

Regulus pulled back, breath ragged.

“Isa—”

He shook his head, stepping away, dragging a hand over his mouth. He looked flustered, aroused, overwhelmed all at once. His chest rose and fell in uneven breaths as he tried to catch his breath.

Isa blinked up at him, lips parted, breath warm and shallow. She took a step closer, gaze unwavering. Her voice was quiet but steady. “Why not, Reg?”

Regulus exhaled sharply, raking a hand through his hair. “Because we can’t.”

Isa’s eyes were deep with emotion, stretching to her soul and beyond. “I think we can.”

Regulus let out a mirthless laugh, shaking his head. “Oh, Ies, it’s — it’s —” He exhaled, voice quieter now. “I am not *him*, and you are not *him*. This… this isn’t how it’s supposed to be, Ies.”

Isa’s expression softened now that she finally had him talking.

Regulus continued. “We can’t do this just because we’re lonely.”

Isa stepped closer, taking his hands, stilling them, stopping them from fidgeting and running through his hair nervously.

“I think the majority of people do this because they’re lonely, Reg.” She let out a breath of a laugh, shaking her head slightly. “And I think the majority of them don’t even like each other.” Her fingers slipped from his hands, trailing instead to the fabric of his collar. She toyed with it, hesitant, before tilting her chin up. “And we like each other, Reg.” A brief pause. “It works.”

Something flickered in her eyes. She was clearly thinking about that night. Then, softer, breathier, she said, “*God*, it works.”

Regulus felt completely dazed by her closeness, by the depth in her eyes, by the flashing of memories and the undeniable proof that, indeed, something between them worked. Without a doubt, there was something that made magic happen when they were kissing, when they were naked and exploring each other.

Maybe all of this would have been enough. Maybe he was already seconds from caving when Isa took his hand.

She guided it to her thigh, placing his palm against smooth, warm skin.

Regulus stilled, eyes flicking to hers, confused. But she didn't say anything, she didn't break eye contact. She just kept looking at him, gaze steady as she slowly lifted the fabric of her gown with her free hand, guiding his fingers — higher, higher — until silk gave way to bare skin.

Regulus sucked in a sharp breath as his fingers brushed over soft, damp heat.

He tensed, wincing at the raw, physical reaction that slammed through him. The realisation of just how warm she was. How soft — how utterly *aching* for him.

Isa didn't look away.

A moment stretched between them, charged and breathless. She had put every ounce of control in his hands — and yet, paradoxically, she had disarmed him completely.

Something inside him snapped.

Regulus swallowed hard, retreating his fingers with slow precision, dragging over her just enough to make her whimper — a sound that sent fire licking through his veins, made his blood run hot. And then his hand moved to cup her face, tilting it up as he kissed her again.

The kiss deepened instantly, growing hungry, desperate, feverish.

Regulus pushed her back until she was against the balustrade, his body pressing into hers. With one hand he held her face steady as they kissed, the other one traced down over the curve of her breasts. Her sharp inhale against his lips when he brushed over them made heat coil deep, deep in his stomach.

Isa's fingers curled at the nape of his neck, pulling him closer, moving against him in that devilish way.

"*Please.*"

Something primal tore through him. With the built-up tension, the taste of her on his tongue, the head of her body against his, the alcohol in his veins — there was no other thought in his mind.

Regulus spun her around, pressing her stomach to the balustrade, his chest flush against her back. Isa gasped softly at the shift, looking out over the estate, the moonlit grounds stretching endlessly before her. She let out a half-laugh, half-disbelieving sound as he tightened his grip on her, his body pressing more firmly against hers, his breath hot against her ear.

"Ies, on a scale of one to ten, how expensive is this dress?"

Isa let out a breathy laugh. "Fifteen."

Regulus sighed, nodding. "Too bad."

With a flick of his wand, fabric split down the back, silk falling away from her skin.

Isa's laughter was incredulous, delighted — before it was cut off entirely as Regulus caught her lips sideways again, his body still pressed against hers, his chest against her back.

Another flick of his wand and red lace slipped from her ankle.

It was as if something had overtaken him. Never — not in any version of reality — would he have considered this possible. The idea of Regulus Black taking Isadora Nott against the balustrade of Dreadmoor Keep while a waltz played inside was so utterly inconceivable that he would later wonder if he'd been possessed. Or maybe it was the alcohol. Or maybe Isa was a bloody siren. He had no clue, but it consumed him. He was beyond thought, beyond reason, beyond control.

His breath came heavy, ragged. His hands shook slightly as he fumbled with his robes, undoing them, freeing himself at last.

He pressed against her, lips trailing hot down the side of her neck as he positioned himself.

Regulus paused for half a second — just long enough to look at her. Isa turned her head, breath coming in quick, shallow pants. Her pupils were blown wide, lips parted, gaze dark with want.

She gave the smallest nod, which was all it took.

Isa moaned when he pushed inside her, head tilting back against his shoulder.

Regulus shushed her, his hand coming up over her mouth, though there was a teasing edge to his voice when he whispered—

“They’ll hear us.”

Sure, the terrace was private enough that it wouldn’t draw immediate attention, so people outside wouldn’t see them. But people *could* easily hear them. The thought made him irrationally hard.

Regulus moved slowly, his body pressing into hers carefully as they adjusted, one arm wrapped around her, bracing against the balustrade, the other firm on her hip, giving him control — letting him move against her without pressing her into the stone.

He wanted to touch her properly. Wanted to make sure she was enjoying this just as much as him, wanted to coax more of those moans from her that he’d have to stifle against his hand, but the remnants of her dress blocked his access.

Leaning into her ear, his breath warm against her skin, he whispered, voice rough, “Touch yourself.”

Isa tensed slightly, a soft, breathless sound escaping her lips at the sheer audacity of the request, at the scandalous thought of touching herself in front of him.

“What?” she asked, voice laced with disbelief and arousal.

“I can’t reach because of your dress,” he whispered, his voice dropping lower, more dangerous. “But it’ll feel better for you. So — touch yourself.”

Her breath hitched, but she didn’t hesitate for long. Slowly, Isa slid her hand between her legs, a subtle, tantalising motion that sent a shudder through him. He looked up at the sky, needing a moment to steady himself. Then, with a breath drawn deep, he moved again.

*****

When they were finished, neither of them moved for a long moment. They remained as they were — Isa leaning forward against the balustrade, Regulus pressed against her back, their breathing still uneven, still catching up. Isa's head rested backwards against his shoulder, her unruly hair tickling his jaw, and after a beat, Regulus let his own head drop lightly atop hers.

Then, their gazes met. Isa exhaled a breathy, incredulous laugh — overwhelmed, dazed, completely blissed out.

Regulus, despite himself, let out a silent laugh too. Then, with a sigh, he pulled back, murmuring, "You okay, Ies?"

Isa turned slightly, her lips curving as she met his gaze, still looking delightfully wrecked. "Oh, Reg," she breathed. "I'm more than okay."

Regulus snorted, running a hand through his hair before flicking his wand, casting a gentle Scourgify over both of them and adjusting his trousers.

Isa tilted her head, scanning the balcony. "How many people know about this spot?"

Regulus considered this. "Well… a few. At least the Blacks and the Rosiers."

A brief silence settled between them as the realisation dawned that they had been ridiculously lucky no one had walked in on them.

The thought of Cissy going for air… or worse, *Bellatrix*.

Isa hummed, stretching slightly. "We have to get back."

Regulus nodded, adjusting his cuffs before gesturing her over. "Come stand here."

Isa arched a brow but stepped towards him, watching as he crouched slightly, assessing the state of her gown.

"Hold this part up," he instructed, grasping another section of the fabric himself. With a precise flick of his wand, the torn silk knit itself back together, the seam smoothing out.

Regulus tilted his head, inspecting his work. "A layman wouldn't notice, but your family's tailor definitely will."

Isa, entirely unbothered, smirked. “I’ll come up with an excuse.”

She reached for her lace panties on the floor and Regulus turned away slightly, giving her some privacy as he leaned against the balustrade, eyes flickering over the darkened grounds below.

That same combination of heat and guilt that had mastered him two nights ago crept up again. He shoved it down violently, determined to leave it for when he was alone.

Then, suddenly, she was behind him again — moving in close. *Very* close. Her breath ghosted against his ear as she whispered, “At any rate, it was worth it.”

Regulus’s head snapped toward her, but before he could react, she smirked — cheeky, wicked and still slightly flushed — then reached into the pocket of his dress robes, slipping something inside.

Regulus frowned, pulling out the delicate scrap of fabric she had just deposited.

Red lace.

His stomach dropped. His fingers tightened around it as he stared at the garment, his pulse kicking up.

He looked back at Isa, but she was already walking away, her gown swaying effortlessly as she disappeared inside, not sparing him a single glance over her shoulder.

Regulus groaned, dropping his head against the balustrade, fingers still curled around the lace.

Shit.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Regulus, conflicted to the core.

Next chapter will show us some of our favourite Muggle, the return to Hogwarts and the inevitable - the war is intensifying, the plot is thickening... In general, prepare for darker stuff and more angst.

Next chapter will be either Sunday or Monday.
Lots of love. ❤

Chapter 16: Of Fleeing & Tragedies

Chapter Notes

> Ok, it seems I just can't write short chapters. I try to draw the line at around 8000 words but it just doesn't workkkk. So, another longer chapter!
>
> Hope you enjoy and let me know what you think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Alright, so you put your right foot in front — yes, like that! Now shift to the right — good, and then the left foot — oh, no, not all the way to — wait, don’t—”

Regulus hit the ice with a loud thud.

Under normal circumstances, he would have caught himself or braced his fall — at the very least preventing his back from taking the full impact.

Unfortunately, neither was an option at the moment.

Because he was stranded in the middle of a frozen pond with nothing to hold onto — no railing, no walls. And he had no control over any part of his body to brace his fall, as he was currently wearing ice skates.

Just him, the ice, and the miserable, humiliating reality of his own incompetence.

For someone who had grown up as the spare to the most powerful wizarding family in Britain, raised in an environment that thrived on dysfunction, Regulus had seen his fair share of bizarre, surprising and — honestly — downright alarming situations.

Yet, somehow — somehow — this moment ranked as one of the strangest fucking things he had ever participated in.

Because Regulus Arcturus Black was ice skating — with a Muggle.

Sirius would have exploded with pride if he could see him now. He wouldn’t, though, because Regulus was attempting this ridiculous endeavour not in Hyde Park or on the pond at Hampstead Heath,

where Marie-Anne had originally suggested, but on some sad, pathetic little patch of ice in a distinctly grotty part of London.

The risk of running into — or stumbling into, though certainly not ice skating into, because that was proving to be impossible — someone who recognised him was too high in those places, so Regulus had decided against them.

Still, against all logic, the idea of ice skating had intrigued him. And somehow, Marie-Anne had managed to coax him into trying it.

He had no idea how or why, but the Muggle had some serious power over him.

It took another hour before he managed to properly balance himself on the ice, though deliberately moving around still wasn't much of an option. It was cold — the coldest winter in years. He couldn't cast a heating spell — both because it risked exposing him to Marie-Anne and because of the Trace — so at some point, he decided he had suffered enough.

The holidays lasted until a week after the Ball, and it was the last Saturday before the return to Hogwarts. The entire week he had spent buried in homework, bantering with Evan and Barty the few times they popped by and, against his will, thinking about the Ball. No matter how hard he tried, no matter how much he distracted himself, his mind kept going to Isa and that red lace. The lace that was still in the pocket of his dress robes, which he had promptly hung in his wardrobe and where, for all he knew, it had burned a hole straight through the fabric by now. He hadn't checked.

But his mind was chaos. A constant, unrelenting loop of questions. What had Isa meant by it? Was it just for fun? Or was it a message? And if it was a message… what the hell was it supposed to mean?

So, Regulus did what he did best when his world became too much.

He fled to the Muggle world.

And, well, truth be told – he really did need some new books, so his destination had been an easy choice.

Marie-Anne had greeted him at the bookshop like an old friend, all bright eyes, energy and curious questions. Her parents lived in Leeds but apart from Christmas, she was spending her university holidays in London. She had to work, after all.

He'd popped by twice, spending her lunch break with her, distracting her from work after, and then staying to help her close up to make up for it. And now, on Saturday, she had the afternoon off. So when he'd stopped by to pick up the books that hadn't been in stock before, he somehow found himself saying yes to the ridiculous plan of ice skating.

And now with the ice skating ordeal over, they took the car to a slightly less dismal part of the city. Regulus bought her a hot chocolate with whipped cream from some Muggle café, as promised.

It had been fun and comfortable, in that easy way Marie-Anne seemed to make everything. She spent half the time spinning tales about her university friends and sharing all the absurd anecdotes about her family during Christmas.

Then, with a sigh, she glanced at her watch. "I've got to head off, though. Jamie's invited me to watch United v Liverpool tonight, and I need to get changed." She grinned, eyes bright with anticipation. "I *cannot* wait for the match."

Regulus tilted his head. "Who are you supporting?"

Marie-Anne gasped in exaggerated offence, pressing a hand to her chest. "Liverpool, obviously. *You'll Never Walk Alone*, Reg, come on."

She hummed a few bars of the anthem under her breath, shaking her head like she had never been more disappointed in him.

Regulus smirked. "Don't cry too hard tonight, then. United are definitely going to win."

Marie-Anne let out a dramatic noise. "*Reg*, I never took you for a football lad."

Her eyes flicked quickly to the bag filled with books by Shakespeare, very much underscoring her point.

Regulus snorted. He was far from a football lad, of course — the sport didn't exist in his world, after all. But he *had* learned a lot about it. Everything absorbed from Miller and her ridiculous obsession with the game.

And, well — his own quiet fascination too, which he could freely indulge in through her.

Marie-Anne stood, stretching briefly before grabbing her coat. Regulus followed, slipping into his own.

She glanced at him. “You sure I don’t need to drop you off somewhere? It’s no hassle at all.”

“No, truly. I’ll get the bus.”

He wouldn’t of course; he’d find a secluded spot to Apparate back to the gate of Black Manor.

Marie-Anne sighed, giving him a knowing look. “Looking forward to going back to boarding school then?”

Regulus hesitated.

Tomorrow, he’d be back in the wizarding world. No more hiding out in the Muggle one. Tragic, really, that it actually felt like… a shame.

Though, honestly, the real tragedy was yet to come. If he’d known then what he knew later, he’d have laughed at his own foolishness. Laughed at the thought that two nights with Isa had pushed him to flee to Marie-Anne and her bookshop.

Marie-Anne studied his expression, her gaze softer now.

“Yeah. I can imagine,” she nodded gently.

She pulled him into a brief hug, warm and easy.

“See you for Easter, alright?”

Regulus exhaled, offering a small smile. “Yeah. Of course.”

*****

The next day, Regulus didn’t board the Hogwarts Express early like he normally did. Instead, he waited until the last minute before stepping onto the steaming train and making his way to the usual compartment. There were two people he didn’t particularly fancy seeing — least of all alone. One would be at the far end of the train where all the Gryffindors usually sat, so he was safe there. But the other… the other would undoubtedly be in the same compartment as Barty, Evan and the rest, a fate to which he had resigned himself. He could make it easier though, by at least avoiding being alone with her. Hence, the delay.

He boarded just before the final whistle blew, moving swiftly down the corridor toward the outer compartments. With a deep breath, he slid the door open and stepped inside.

To his utter surprise, only two people were inside — and, miraculously, they were the right two.

Barty looked up. “Black.”

Evan smirked. “Almost thought you weren’t coming.”

Barty raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, what happened to your impeccable timing?”

Regulus, still slightly flustered, coughed and sat down a fraction too stiffly. “Dunno. Took a bit too long at home. Apparated here.”

Both Barty and Evan gave him identical looks of bafflement.

“You can Apparate?” Evan asked.

Regulus blinked. Right. They didn’t know. And, well, considering it wasn’t exactly legal to Apparate without a license, it probably wasn’t something he should be so casual about.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said dismissively, eager to shift the conversation to the one thing that actually mattered. “So… where is everyone?”

Barty and Evan recovered quickly from the revelation that Regulus could Apparate, or perhaps they simply picked up on his clear reluctance to discuss it.

Barty rolled his eyes, clearly annoyed. “Snape, Mulciber and Avery had to finish their essays for tomorrow. Said they wouldn’t be able to concentrate with us around.”

Regulus snorted. He couldn’t exactly blame them. It *was* hard to concentrate with Barty and Evan in the same room.

Then, shifting slightly in his seat, he asked, “And… the girls?”

Barty gave him a look that lingered just a beat too long. Regulus schooled his expression into neutral boredom, well aware of how observant Barty could be.

Evan, however, seemed oblivious and answered immediately. “They took a carriage on their own — some seventh-year girls joined them

too, I think."

Regulus nodded, pretending not to find that piece of information utterly relieving.

It wasn't that he didn't want to see Isa. He just… didn't want to break the ice in front of their friends. He knew himself, knew he'd be awkward and stiff for the first few minutes, and he didn't particularly want an audience for that. He wished he could be smooth, confident, smug even. And the fact that he so strongly wished for that made him even more anxious about failing to be it — an endless, self-fulfilling loop of overthinking. An endless cycle of being anxious about being anxious and therefore being anxious.

So, for now, he was just glad he wouldn't have to face her in the carriage and he could bury himself in his new book — *Coriolanus* by Shakespeare. He was, of course, familiar with Shakespeare, but had never really considered reading him. He preferred political treatises, philosophy, history. Still, Marie-Anne had insisted he try some of his works — so here he was, flipping it open on the Hogwarts Express.

The ride was peaceful. He read, occasionally listening in on Barty and Evan's conversation, interjecting with a comment every now and then. It was peaceful, calm. So calm, in fact, that he wondered why they didn't do this more often — just the three of them in the compartment, plenty of space to stretch out.

He thought, again, about how lucky he was — when suddenly the door slid open.

Isa and Amaryllis stood in the doorway.

Regulus sat up straighter immediately. His pulse jumped into an alarming rhythm.

"Hi, guys," Amaryllis greeted. "Just wanted to say hi. Good holidays?"

Barty gave a lazy nod. "Of course."

Evan tilted his head. "How about you, Greengrass?"

"Great, thanks." Amaryllis smiled. "Well, see you in a bit at the castle."

She turned to leave, but Isa lingered. Her gaze swept over the compartment. "Barty. Evan."

Her eyes landed on Regulus. Silence stretched, thick and charged.

They held each other's stare, as if that unspoken challenge from her entrance hall still hung between them — neither looking away, yet both visibly uncomfortable.

And then, at the exact same time—

"Isa," Regulus said.

"Reg," Isa said.

Another pause. Then Isa turned on her heel, closing the door behind her.

Regulus exhaled, wincing, before resolutely turning back to his book. When he looked up, though, he found Barty and Evan staring at him.

Evan blinked, visibly confused. "What was that?"

Barty looked a mix of amused and confused. "Trouble in paradise, Black?"

Regulus rolled his eyes, shooting Barty an unimpressed look. "There's neither trouble nor paradise, Crouch."

Although… now that he thought about it… what had happened — the things they'd done — the current state of affairs…

Was there trouble? Was there paradise?

Apparently, his inner turmoil was written all over his face, because Barty's eyes suddenly widened in gleeful realisation.

He let out a loud gasp.

"You shagged her," he blurted out, his voice a strange mix of incredulity and sheer pride. "*You* shagged *Nott*."

Evan's head snapped between Barty and Regulus, the uproar plain on his face.

Regulus groaned, dragging his hands down his face. Which, unfortunately, was enough of an answer.

Barty let out a bark of laughter, delighted beyond measure. "I *knew* this would happen — Black *shagged* Nott."

“Don’t call it that,” Regulus snapped, knowing full well that the nights with Isa were deserving of far more respectful words than *shagging* .

Barty and Evan exchanged an insufferable knowing glance. Their smirks widened in perfect sync.

“Oh, this is bloody fantastic,” Barty declared, rubbing his hands together in glee.

Evan tilted his head in contemplation. “But what does that mean, though? Are you, like… *together*?”

Regulus’s entire body tensed at the suggestion, his eyes widening in abject panic at the thought of anyone — including Isa — thinking they were together because of this.

Evan caught on immediately, nodding in understanding. “You… don’t know what it means.”

Regulus groaned again, rubbing his temples. “I *don’t* know — you — you have to help me.”

Sure, he’d definitely prefer *not* to talk about this with anyone, but well, desperate times called for desperate measures. And Regulus was desperate — utterly, completely, despairingly desperate.

The only people he’d ever consider turning to with something like this were Isa — obviously not an option this time — or James — arguably even worse.

No, he had precisely two people in his life he remotely trusted with this and they were sitting across from him in the compartment. And well, they *did* have experience with girls.

They would be able to tell him what it all meant. What he was supposed to do. What the message was behind the red lace.

He could already see the barely contained glee on Barty’s face as he opened his mouth, closed it again, bit his lip — evidently trying, and failing, to suppress his amusement.

Evan, to his credit, managed to look more neutral, but there was definitely something suspiciously curious in his expression.

“Alright,” Barty said, nodding solemnly once he had composed himself. “For us to help you, we need some details, mate.”

Regulus frowned. “Details?”

Barty and Evan exchanged another quick glance, something twinkling in their eyes before they both turned back to him, suddenly serious.

“Yes,” Evan said, voice smooth, reasonable. “We can’t help you properly without… some context.”

Barty nodded, looking far too pleased with himself. “Yes, so this… *lovemaking*—”

Evan let out a short snort. Regulus shot him a glare.

Barty ignored them both. “—was it a one-time thing? Or multiple nights?”

“Or multiple times a night,” Evan added, his tone clinically analytical, way too business-like for the topic they were discussing.

Regulus shifted uncomfortably, deeply regretting every life choice that had led him to this conversation. But well, they were right — they couldn’t properly assess anything without any information.

He coughed, cleared his throat, and shifted again, feeling deeply out of his depth. “Both, I suppose.”

Barty visibly struggled to keep a straight face. His lips twitched, his expression wavered, but he fought — valiantly — to school his features into something neutral. “You mean—”

“Yes, multiple times on multiple nights,” Regulus snapped, already regretting everything.

Barty’s smirk turned positively devilish. “Alright. Multiple times, multiple nights. So I *reckon* that means it was…” He let the word hang, teasing.

Regulus narrowed his eyes.

“…*good*?” Barty finished, his tone completely innocent.

Regulus glared. “That is irrelevant. I am not discussing it with you.”

Evan, held up a hand diplomatically, his face somehow managing to stay far more composed than Barty’s. “Reg, we’ve been friends for years. No judgment. We just need to know, you know… for the purpose of painting the bigger picture.”

Barty cleared his throat, visibly struggling to maintain composure. “Yes, precisely. On a scale of one to ten?”

Regulus glowered at them both. But after a moment of hesitation, he exhaled sharply and nodded, “Solid ten.”

Barty let out a low whistle.

Evan was clearly trying to keep things moving before Barty lost it entirely, which would undoubtedly take Regulus with him. “Alright,” he quickly said. “And you do think she’s… fit, right?”

Regulus rolled his eyes, feeling that they were very close to hitting his absolute limit of tolerated discussion on this topic. “That’s a fact, Rosier. There’s not a person out there who’d argue she isn’t absurdly beautiful.”

Evan and Barty exchanged another look — a very wicked one.

“Right,” Barty continued, choosing his words carefully. “So, when you… slept together—” he made an exaggerated hand gesture, “—did you… do all of it?”

Regulus squinted at him. “What do you mean?”

Barty’s expression remained disturbingly businesslike. “Like, did you go down on her?”

Regulus froze.

His mind immediately betrayed him, conjuring an all-too-vivid memory — the feel of her thighs beneath his hands, the way her fingers had tangled in his curls, the breathless, choked sound she’d made when he’d finally, *finally*—

No. *Absolutely not.*

He snapped back to reality, his heart hammering a bit too hard against his ribs.

“I am not discussing this,” he said firmly.

Barty and Evan shared a gleeful look. In perfect synchrony, their voices smug and *deeply* proud:

“*Yeah*, he went down on her.”

Regulus groaned.

Evan leaned in, smirking. “And did she… you know…” he made some grand, vague gestures, “…return the favour?”

Regulus immediately — violently — tried to push down the memory of Isa between his legs — her tongue, her hands, the way she’d looked up at him—

Shit.

His silence was enough of an answer.

Barty and Evan exchanged another one of those victorious glances, and once again, in eerie unison:

“*Yeah*, she *definitely*—”

“*Don’t*,” Regulus cut in quickly, his voice a little too sharp. He refused to let them finish that sentence. “This is all pointless. I just—” He ran a hand over his face, feeling deeply exasperated now. “I just don’t know what it means.”

Barty shrugged. “Sometimes it doesn’t have to mean something, Black.” He smirked, leaning back lazily. “You can just… enjoy the ride.”

Evan snorted at the innuendo.

Regulus rolled his eyes, but then — he hesitated. Shifted slightly in his seat.

There was one question. One question that had been burning in his mind for days. He’d tried ignoring it, tried convincing himself it didn’t matter — but, well, it *did*.

And this would probably be his only opportunity to ask. The only chance to find out.

He sighed deeply, clearing his throat, forcing himself to push past the heat rising in his neck as he looked up at Barty and Evan.

They sensed it immediately. Both of them leaned forward a fraction, their expressions turning from smug amusement into actual intrigue.

Regulus hesitated. Then, finally:

“What… what does it mean when she… puts her panties in your pocket afterwards?”

There was a pause. A long one.

Evan and Barty clearly had not been expecting that. They took a moment to process, both of them blinking, the words sinking in.

And then—

As if choreographed — both their faces twisted into identical expressions of delighted wickedness.

Barty was the first to recover. He leaned in, grinning. “First of all,” he began, tone laced with glee, “what kind of panties are we talking about?”

Regulus closed his eyes briefly. He should have seen that coming. But at this point, resistance was futile. He truly, really needed answers.

“Red.” He coughed. “Lacy.”

Another pause.

Barty and Evan visibly restrained themselves from making eye contact.

But then, suddenly, Evan frowned slightly, as if something had just occurred to him. “Wait,” he said, looking genuinely confused. “I don’t get it. Why would you have *pockets*? You’re not wearing anything when you—”

He stopped mid-sentence.

Realisation hit.

And it was visible the exact moment it dawned on Barty too.

His whole body froze. His eyes widened dramatically. Slowly, painstakingly slowly, he turned toward Regulus, his smirk growing at an almost sinister pace.

“Oh, Evan,” he drawled, drawing out every syllable with obscene satisfaction. “I don’t think he’s talking about a… conventional place.” He turned back to Regulus, his smirk now pure evil. “Are we now, Black?”

Regulus glared — hard.

Barty gasped as another realisation hit him. “You shagged her at the *Ball*.”

Regulus’s jaw clenched. “I said, don’t call it—”

“No, mate,” Barty cut in, shaking his head in all seriousness. “If you did her quick and dirty at a public event like the Ball and she put her panties in your pocket afterwards… I am definitely allowed to call it shagging.”

Regulus considered this.

Well, he actually had a point.

But that wasn’t the point *right now*.

“Back to the matter at hand,” Regulus pressed, shaking off the topic as fast as humanly possible. “What — what does it mean? What’s your verdict? Your… grand revelation? What do I do?”

He needed some kind of answer. Some clarity. Some—

Evan and Barty exchanged a glance.

Evan shrugged. “Dunno, mate.”

Silence.

Regulus stared.

“That’s it?” he barked. “All this and that’s what you give me?”

Barty clapped a hand on his shoulder, utterly unsympathetic. “Listen, Black, I’ll tell you this much—” He grinned, eyes glinting with amusement. “If you don’t go through with her, you’re a fucking idiot.”

Regulus groaned.

*****

Regulus deeply,*deeply* regretted letting his friends in on what had happened between him and Isa. He had threatened to kill them — slowly and indescribably painfully — if they so much as breathed a word about it to her, but, well, Barty was not exactly known for his subtlety.

He didn't say or do anything outright suspicious, but to an observant eye, his antics were obvious. He would, for example, shove the jug of pumpkin juice Regulus's way just when Isa reached for it, forcing her to ask Regulus to pass it over. Or he'd start a question about their homework, wait until both Isa and Regulus chimed in, and then — rather conveniently — retreat from the conversation entirely.

They were all small acts — small calculated nudges, but Regulus knew perfectly well what he was doing — but just always a second too late.

If he hadn't been so thoroughly annoyed at being outmanoeuvred by Barty every single time, Regulus might have actually found it endearing.

Still, he did his best to pretend everything was normal. He sat beside Isa in class, he sat with her in their usual corner of the common room, along with the rest of the group, he worked on his essays next to her in the library. Regulus just made sure that they steered very clear of venturing into potentially sensitive topics.

And, above all, he ensured they were never alone together.

Sometimes it was just utterly wonderful to avoid one's problems.

Regulus was realistic enough — and, frankly, intelligent enough — to know he couldn't keep it up forever. So, really, he shouldn't have been surprised when, on Thursday — four days in — he found himself alone with her.

What *was* surprising, though, was how it happened.

They'd just had Quidditch practice for the first time since the holidays. Normally, they'd have trained on Tuesday as well, but it had been too cold — cold enough that, apparently, James had run such a brutal practice on Monday that his Seeker ended up in the hospital wing with hypothermia despite the heating charms.

Normally, Gryffindor didn't have practice on Mondays because of the Potions class attended by the Captain and one of the Beaters, but Slughorn had felt under the weather and had cancelled the class. Apparently James had felt so guilty about the whole ordeal on the pitch that he hadn't even complained when Madam Hooch banned them from training until further notice.

Thursday was still cold, but nowhere near as bitter as the past few

days, so Slytherin had been given the green light.

Practice had gone surprisingly well considering everyone had been off for over a fortnight, and Regulus strolled back towards the castle in a rather good mood. As always, he walked with Miller down into the dungeons, pointedly not thinking about the Prefects' bathroom on the fifth floor.

He hadn't really seen James yet. He'd caught glimpses of him in the Great Hall and the corridors, but in every instance, James had his back to him.

Regulus had no idea what he'd do if they actually locked eyes. Somehow, he had the distinct and unsettling feeling that James would know. That he'd see the chaos in Regulus's eyes. He wouldn't know why it was there, but he would know that it was.

Regulus gave his head a small shake, forcing the thought aside. Instead, he let himself be absorbed by Miller's retelling of her Christmas holidays — ones she had labelled boring and uneventful, but which, to Regulus, sounded nothing short of idyllic.

It reminded him he still owed her a Christmas present. He wasn't big on Christmas like many others — the biggest being James, of course — but he made sure all his friends had something from him on Christmas morning. And he considered Miller a friend, so getting her a present wasn't really the question — the question was how to get it to her.

Although his post — unlike Sirius's back in the day — wasn't monitored, sending a Christmas present to a Muggle household still felt like a questionable idea, so he'd decided to save it for when they were back at Hogwarts. And somehow, this felt like the right time.

"Look, meet me here after your shower, alright? I've got something for you," Regulus said as they reached the common room.

Miller stilled, looking momentarily stunned before nodding and hurrying off to her dorm.

A little while and a refreshing shower later, he led her to a quieter part of the common room — far away from his usual corner, because if his friends caught wind of him giving Miller a Christmas present, they'd get entirely too weird about it.

They'd only just sat down when his eyes fell on the rather large,

square package in her hands.

“What’s that?” Regulus asked.

Miller raised her eyebrows, eyeing the smaller, rectangular package in his hands. “What’s *that*?”

Regulus arched an eyebrow. “A Christmas present, Miller.”

Miller’s face lit up. She flushed, looking absolutely delighted. “You got me a present?”

Regulus suddenly realised that girls were all weird about presents. He could *not* deal with too much enthusiasm — or, potentially worse — *tears*.

He shifted in his seat, eyeing her warily. “Look… you’re not the kind of girl that cries when she gets a present, are you?”

Miller shot him a withering look. “No.”

Regulus sighed in utter relief.

“Well, I got you a present too,” Miller added, shifting slightly.

Regulus snorted. “You got *me* a present?”

“Yeah, I don’t have an owl, so I didn’t really know how to send it, so…” She shoved the package into his hands.

Regulus glanced at it, intrigued, before meticulously unwrapping it.

The square shape had been deceptive, because inside the box was something round, black and white, a—

“You got me a *football*?” Regulus asked, baffled.

Miller flushed, suddenly looking uncertain. “Yes, well — we’ve been talking about football for ages, and I noticed they don’t really exist in the magical world, so I bought one in—”

Her words died out as Regulus immediately dropped the ball onto the floor and kicked it — unfortunately, though, a tad too hard because it went flying, straight into Amaryllis.

“*Shit* — sorry, sorry!” Regulus said quickly, scrambling to retrieve it.

Amaryllis sat there, utterly stunned, blinking down at where the ball had bounced off her shoulder. She slowly turned her head, giving him a look of pure, disbelieving affront.

Regulus shot her a painful, vaguely sheepish smile.

Miller made a strangled noise that was definitely a laugh. “Sorry, Cap, but you’ve got the coordination of a drunk troll.”

“Oh, shut up, Miller.”

She grinned and got to her feet, using her foot to flick the ball up into the air before catching it with ease.

Regulus narrowed his eyes. “Alright, show-off.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault you’re absolute rubbish at it.”

Regulus scoffed, reaching for the ball, but Miller easily dodged him, nudging it behind her and spinning away, keeping control of it with frustratingly smooth movements.

Regulus rolled his eyes. “Yes, yes, not bad, Miller.”

“Not bad?” Miller repeated, giving him an indignant look. “That was brilliant and you know it, Cap.”

Regulus rolled his eyes but nodded approvingly. He’d never seen a witch do that before.

He didn’t notice the table a few feet away — Amaryllis, Melania and Isa — all eyeing the scene with a mix of curiosity and amusement.

Miller hesitated, suddenly looking a bit uncertain again. “So… so… you like it?”

Regulus snorted. “Do I like it? It’s fantastic, Miller.”

Miller grinned, then abruptly kicked the ball at him.

Regulus barely caught it before it could hit him square in the stomach.

In a desperate — and by now honestly futile — attempt to save face, he quickly put the ball away and turned to his own package. He eyed it with mild regret, realising that it wasn’t nearly as exciting as a football, but well — it was too late for that, now.

Miller opened it a bit self-consciously, carefully unwrapping the parcel to reveal two books: *Quidditch Through the Ages* and *The Art of the Quaffle: Strategy and Tactics for Aspiring Chasers*.

She stared at them, fingers ghosting over the covers.

Regulus scratched the back of his head, shifting slightly when the silence stretched. “You… like it?”

Miller looked up at him, her expression unreadable for a moment, before she suddenly burst out, “I *love* it, this is so kind! You really didn’t have to do this — seriously, this is — *this is* —”

Regulus snorted, raising an eyebrow. Truly the present didn’t deserve *that* level of praise.

But then, he noticed it: a slight shimmer in her eyes, a tightness in her throat when she swallowed.

Regulus blinked.

Oh *no*. Oh, *hell no*.

He shot her a flat, deeply unimpressed look. “I thought you said you weren’t going to cry?”

Miller glared at him through what was definitely tears. “I’m *not* a crier.”

Regulus arched a slow, sceptical eyebrow.

“I’m *not*!” Miller insisted. “Really, I *don’t* cry. Not normally, but somehow now, now I’m on my—”

She stopped.

Regulus tilted his head.

There really wasn’t a clue. She really hadn’t *said* anything. There was nothing revealing in the slightest what she was on about. She could’ve been about to say literally anything, and yet — yet Regulus somehow knew what she had been about to spill.

Perhaps it was sixth sense.

Perhaps it was Regulus’s intimate experience with the universe’s need to put him in the worst possible situations.

Miller turned red.

Regulus closed his eyes briefly, already feeling the secondhand mortification settle over him as he sighed, long and pained, before saying, slowly, cautiously—

"…Miller. Were you about to say you're… on your period?"

Miller turned even redder.

Regulus turned even more uncomfortable.

Miller refused to look at him, staring intently at her hands gripping the books as she stammered, "Y–yes, sorry, I didn't think—"

Regulus shifted in his seat, praying to every deity he could think of that no one else was listening in on this absolute tragedy of a conversation.

He forced himself to say — although very awkwardly — "It's… alright. You know. It's not something to… I don't know… be embarrassed about… or… something."

He felt like the world's biggest hypocrite.

Because he himself was *utterly* mortified.

Miller groaned, dropping her forehead into her palm. "Sorry, I just — I owled my mum but it'll take a day or two before she answers, and all that, and—"

Regulus tilted his head, something clicking into place.

He straightened. "Miller —you mean you — you're on your period for the *first* time? Like — *right now*?"

Miller made a strangled noise that could only be described as pure horror.

Regulus just stared.

This was it.

This was officially it.

Between Cissy barging into him, completely starkers, post-sex with Isa. Getting paired up with her bloody father an hour later, the man

very much aware of exactly where Regulus's hands and tongue had been all night. That absolutely mortifying conversation with Barty and Evan on the train.

And now this. It was too much. Too fucking much.

Regulus flicked his gaze sideways, spotting Amaryllis, Melania, and Isa at a table nearby. They were hunched over their homework, occasionally stealing glances at him and Miller.

And then — Regulus had an idea. A *brilliant* idea.

He couldn't leave Miller like this. She was clearly in need of… something. Something that Regulus couldn't give. Or well, he knew how everything worked. He was sure he knew better than most of the male population at Hogwarts, at least. But still, even if he *could* have this conversation, he really — really — didn't *want* to.

Regulus stood abruptly.

"Oh, just — just sit here for a bit, alright? Back in a sec," he said.

Miller frowned but nodded.

Yes, it was the best idea, but it did come with some sacrifices.

First, he had to endure an utterly uncomfortable conversation. Second, he had to talk to Isa.

But, well, it was still infinitely better than handling this himself. So he headed straight for the girls' table, exhaling deeply, bracing himself for the torture to come.

Regulus stood before the table, and immediately, three sets of eyes flicked up at him — Amaryllis and Melania both smirking curiously, Isa looking foremost suspicious.

He stared.

How was he supposed to start this?

He considered his options, each one worse than the last.

A fellow woman of your kind is in distress.

Greetings, women of Slytherin. A member of your species requires aid.

He winced.

Fortunately, Amaryllis seemed to take enough pity on him to put him out of his misery.

“Look, Reg, are you going to say something, or are you just planning to stand there like a lemon?”

Regulus exhaled sharply. “I need your help with something.”

That got their interest. The girls exchanged a glance — equal parts confused and entertained.

Melania sat up straighter. “Alright… what’s up, Reg?”

Regulus cleared his throat. “Could you, perhaps… help… Miller with something?”

Isa frowned. “With what?”

Regulus winced. This was the part he had been dreading. He braced himself and attempted, “I think she’s just… for the first time… she’s… she’s got… she’s…”

He stopped.

The three girls exchanged a glance. Regulus completely missed the wickedness in it.

Isa tilted her head, looking up at him, completely serious. “I don’t really understand what you’re trying to say, Reg. How about you, Mel? Amar?”

Melania shook her head. “No, sorry. Could you be a bit more… *specific*?”

Regulus died. Right then and there.

He shot Isa a lethal glare, but her eyes were twinkling with satisfaction.

She was challenging him.

Fine.

“She’s on her period,” Regulus bit out, voice flat. “Menses. *Menstruating. Blood.*”

The girls burst out laughing. Isa literally roared with hilarity.

Amaryllis shot Regulus a satisfied smirk. “Wasn’t so hard now, was it, Reg?”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “Yes, *hilarious*. Now, please — help her. I don’t think she really has anyone to… you know, explain everything, help her out, and stuff.”

If Regulus thought his desperate plea would win them over, he was about to be proven horrifyingly wrong.

Isa leaned back in her chair, feigning confusion. “What do you mean, Reg? I’m sure *you* could explain it to her.” She smiled, far too sweetly. “Or… don’t you understand the workings of our reproductive organs? Don’t you *know* how babies are made?”

Melania and Amaryllis snorted.

Regulus looked at Isa.

Oh, she was *good*. Such a bloody *headache*. But *good*.

But so was he.

Regulus tilted his head, letting his gaze drag slowly over her from head to toe, before arching an eyebrow — sharp, challenging, smug.

“I don’t know, Nott. You tell me. *Do I?*”

A beat of silence.

Regulus did not miss the slight, subtle blush on her cheek.

Melania and Amaryllis glanced between them, confused.

Then Isa snapped, undoubtedly eager to get past the discomfort of the moment. She rolled her eyes in an attempt to come across unfazed. “*Fine.* I’ll talk to her.”

Regulus barely managed to stop himself from doing a victory dance.

*****

Regulus was halfway through brushing his teeth when Isa appeared in the doorway of his dorm — undoubtedly to give him an update on Miller.

Evan and Barty, who had been lounging on his bed just moments before, immediately sprang into motion, trying to leave the dormitory unsuspiciously, casually — thereby guaranteeing they did the absolute, exact opposite.

"We'll leave you to… do…" Evan trailed off, hands flailing vaguely.

Barty made a very poor attempt to rescue him. "Yeah, we'll leave you to… do it."

Which, of course, was the worst possible choice of words. They barely made it out of the room before dissolving into barely contained sniggers, their laughter echoing down the staircase.

Regulus sighed deeply, rinsing out his mouth.

Isa, still standing in the doorway, baffled. Then realisation dawned.

"They know," she stated, the disbelief poorly hidden in her voice. "You told them."

Regulus saw no point in lying. He sighed again, this time more tiredly, and turned to his wardrobe, pulling open a drawer just to give his hands something to do.

"Yes."

Isa let out a small, humourless breath. "Ah. So you *can* talk about it. Just not with me."

Irritation flared in Regulus's chest. That wasn't the same thing at all, and she bloody well knew it. She would've been the first to talk about it — if it hadn't involved her. And besides, it wasn't as though he had just blurted it all out voluntarily; Barty had *guessed*, and what was he supposed to do? He hadn't spilled it for the fun of it.

"No, it's not like that — that's different," he said stiffly, forcing himself to focus on the socks in his hands.

But the irritation was creeping higher, curling around his ribs, pressing against his throat. How could she not understand that he did not want to have this conversation? She knew him better than anyone. She had spent days, *weeks* inside his mind. She had seen him to his very core — his most gruesome memories, his strongest emotions, his deepest feelings and best-hidden thoughts. And yet she couldn't seem to understand this.

“Then are you going to talk about it with me?”

Regulus stiffened.

“I—I don’t know, Ies,” he admitted, his voice tight.

Isa studied him for a long moment, gaze piercing.

“You don’t know if we’re going to talk about it,” she said, quieter now, “or you don’t know… what to do with it?”

Regulus felt like he was going mad. She was too good at this — poking and prodding until someone snapped. Usually, he could withstand it. But this — this was too much. It had been too much for too long.

Why didn’t she understand that with every word, she was trying to get under the skin that he so desperately wanted to crawl out of?

His fingers clenched around the sock, knuckles white.

“I—” He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

He needed her to leave. Now.

Isa tilted her head, unrelenting. “That’s not an answer.”

Regulus snapped.

“What do you want me to say, Ies?” His voice was sharp, breaking apart at the edges.

Why didn’t she understand?

The emotions crashed over him — confusion, anger, fear, and so much sadness.

Confusion about what had happened, about what it was supposed to mean. Had she just felt lonely? Had he just been the easiest option now that Davies was gone? It wasn’t implausible. With Davies out of the picture and the future between Isa and Regulus practically carved into stone by their parents, maybe she had just decided to stop resisting. Maybe she was testing the waters.

Or — did she fancy him?

Had she forgotten about Davies and somehow turned to fancy

Regulus? The thought was so laughable, so utterly surreal that his brain just stopped working when thinking about it. The idea of Isa fancying him was absurd — absurder even than him fancying her, which was already stretching the limits of bizarre.

And now it had happened. They had crossed the line, had gone over the edge of friendship, and whether that meant, whatever that entailed, there was no going back. They could never go back to what they'd been before, could they?

And that made him angry.

Lying in bed at night, going over the whirlwind of emotions and thoughts and sensations, the thing that startled him most wasn't the confusion or even the regret — it was the fury.

He was furious. Furious at Isa having initiated it. Furious at Isa's stupid rolling hips and her moaning breath and her beautiful eyes and her wicked tongue. Furious at her willingness to sacrifice years of friendship just for — for what?

Lust? Company? Curiosity?

Still, the emotion at the top of the list, the one that made his heart ache, that hollowed him from the inside, was sadness. Utter, complete, unfathomable sadness that the world was what it was. That he didn't love her, didn't fancy her, but instead ached for the one person he couldn't have. The one with perfect hands and the softest voice, the cheekiest smile and the most beautifully twinkling eyes.

Perhaps, indeed, love is only for the first beloved.

No. He couldn't do this now.

He stood abruptly, his whole body tense, shaking his head.

"My head is full," he said, voice rough, almost hoarse. "I'm not doing this."

Isa's gaze didn't waver. "We have to talk about it *sometime*, Reg."

Regulus let out a hollow, humourless laugh.

"What do you want me to say, Ies? That it was a mistake? That I regret it? That I—"

Isa's expression flickered — just for a moment — but he saw it.

Then, silence.

“You regret it?” she asked quietly.

Regulus exhaled sharply. “That’s not—”

“Do you *regret* it?” she pressed, her eyes so fierce he was afraid it’d crumble him.

Regulus was silent.

Yes, he regretted it

But he couldn’t say it, because Isa would make it personal. She would think he regretted sleeping with her because it hadn’t lived up to expectations or because she hadn’t been good enough. And that was the furthest thing from the truth — it had lived up to everything. She had been wonderful. It had worked.

And that was exactly the problem.

It had worked, and now he didn’t know what to do with it. And there was James, and there were their parents, waiting to marry them off. And what if they cocked it up before that? What if this ruined everything before it even began?

His head was too fucking full.

Isa’s silence stretched, and when he finally looked at her, he saw it — the understanding settling in, the hurt creeping into her eyes.

Her lips parted slightly as if she wanted to say something before she closed her mouth again. Her expression hardened.

“Alright,” she said, her voice raw, her back straight. “Good we cleared that up.”

She turned to leave.

Regulus instantly felt something panic inside him.

“No — don’t go, Ies, you don’t understand—”

Isa stopped, glanced back, her eyes glinting with something sharp and brittle. “No,” she said softly. “I suddenly see it all very clearly.” A pause. “I’m sorry about all of it, Reg.”

And with that, she was gone.

Fuck. FUCK.

He considered going after her — to try to explain. But it would make a scene in the common room, and besides, he didn't even understand himself. How was he supposed to explain if he didn't get it himself?

So, with a strangled noise, he grabbed the nearest object — Barty's Transfiguration book on the floor — and hurled it against the wall.

"FUCK!"

The word tore out of him, raw and ragged, as the book hit the wall with a dull thud. His hands were shaking, his breath uneven. It was too much — all of it. A fucking mess. His head felt like it was splitting open, too full, too heavy, too everything.

And yet, in hindsight, he'd laugh.

Yes, it was fucked. Yes, it was too much. Yes, it felt like the world was caving in on him, like he was standing on the edge of something irreversible. But later, he'd realise — this was nothing.

Petty teenage dramatics, childish fucking play, compared to what life had in store for him. Compared to what he'd be subjected to. Compared to the things that would carve out his insides and leave him hollow.

He would think back to the Christmas holidays and realise what a fool he'd been. For not cherishing it. For not understanding that it was the last time he'd ever have anything close to peace.

Because after that, it would get worse. So much worse.

For years to come.

*****

Three days later, Regulus stepped through Slughorn's fireplace, arriving once more at Grimmauld Place. His father wasn't home, and his mother — according to the note attached to the hearth — was actually ill this time and resting upstairs. He knew better than to disturb her, so without a second thought, he reached for the Floo powder once more and made his way to Bellatrix's.

The meeting had come as a surprise. They had convened less than two

weeks ago, and while Regulus had the perfect excuse to slip away from Hogwarts, he knew these gatherings had to be limited. Too many absences would attract attention, would raise suspicion.

So, that should have been his first warning — should have told him that this was different, that this was no ordinary meeting.

The second came the moment he stepped into the meeting room.

The Dark Lord was seated at the grand table, his smile smooth as always while he formally greeted him. Flanking him were Yaxley — who offered his signature, slow smirk — and Bellatrix. The expression on Bellatrix's face should have been a dead giveaway. The barely contained excitement, the sharp gleam in her eyes, the way she practically vibrated with it. Something bordering on… arousal.

Regulus's stomach twisted.

The other attendees were Lucius, Mr. Nott — and Cissy. Regulus's brow furrowed before he could stop himself. Cissy was never present at these things, she never attended these meetings.

Which could only mean one thing. And the thing wouldn't be good.

Regulus shot her a glance, confusion and unease plain on his face. Cissy exhaled softly and gave him a small, reassuring smile. Regulus didn't miss how it didn't reach her eyes.

Another warning.

Mr. Nott pressed a glass of Firewhiskey into his hand. Firewhiskey.

Another warning.

Regulus curled his fingers around it, his pulse spiking, his skin clammy.

The others were seated more loosely, less tight than usual. Everyone seemed oddly… informal, giving the meeting a completely different feel from the crowded, formal ones.

Bellatrix was watching him. Her gaze slow and deliberate, her teeth grazing her bottom lip, something dark and expectant in her expression. He pointedly avoided looking at her.

Silence settled. Then—

The Dark Lord spoke.

“What do you know about Hohenhain, Regulus?”

The question sent a jolt through him. He hesitated for a fraction too long before composing himself.

“Not that much,” he admitted, his voice smaller than he would have liked. “Only that it’s well guarded. That it’s in Switzerland, close to the French border.”

Although the Dark Lord inclined his head in an approving nod, Regulus felt like a fool. He should have known more, he was *supposed* to know more — two of their own were imprisoned there. The news had been all over their capture, and their last meeting had discussed it, too.

But he had been preoccupied, too distracted. Stupid, childish things — banter and games during the holidays with his friends. Isa…

He cleared his throat, burning the self-recrimination deep in order to compose himself.

He ground his teeth and buried the self-recrimination deep.

“Yes,” the Dark Lord said, his voice smooth. “Not much is known. It is… secluded. The Swiss do not share their secrets lightly.”

A pause.

“But we have been working on it for weeks. And now—” He let the words hang, the silence deepening. “—we know more than ever before.”

Regulus swallowed. Something heavy settled in his gut.

The Dark Lord’s smile was razor-sharp. “So much, in fact, that I would consider us experts now.”

Regulus’s fingers tensed around his glass. He flicked another glance at Cissy. She met his gaze with another one of those supposedly reassuring smiles that were actually just unsettling.

His pulse was a drumbeat in his ears.

Then Lucius unrolled a large piece of parchment, spreading it across the table in front of him.

Regulus leaned forward, realising it was a map — a map of Hohenhain.

The lines and ink laid out its structure — multiple wings, each isolated from the others. The architecture was efficient, almost clinical in its precision. There were paragraphs in German, detailing the different sections, security measures, protocols.

Lucius tapped the parchment. “This,” he said with a kind smile, “is the layout of Hohenhain. Do you understand what it says?”

Regulus’s gaze flicked over the German text.

He nodded. “Yes.”

In this room, at least three others could read it — Cissy, Bellatrix and Mr. Nott.

And then, all of a sudden, realisation hit him. The map, the weeks of intelligence-gathering…

They were going in.

Regulus’s stomach turned to lead.

“We’re freeing Rodolphus and Mr. Carrow.”

A beat of silence followed.

“Yes,” the Dark Lord answered, his voice smooth. “We are.”

Mr. Nott reached for another roll of parchment, unrolling it carefully. It was another map, this time of the surrounding area. The texts were in French.

The Dark Lord tapped a finger against a particular paragraph about security protocols.

His finger hovered over the paragraph. "You understand this as well, Regulus?" he asked, his voice smooth, eyes unsettlingly piercing.

Regulus scanned the text, nodding stiffly.

The Dark Lord’s eyes gleamed. "What does it say?"

Regulus suppressed the fleeting thought that a simple translation spell would have laid out every word in perfect English.

Instead, he leaned in, his eyes following the words.

“It says,” he began slowly, keeping his tone steady, “that if there is a problem in one wing, the prisoners will be moved to another. Wing A will be transferred to Wing C. Wing B to Wing D. And so on, in that order.”

Mr. Nott nodded approvingly. “Very good, Regulus.”

Regulus couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right. They could have used a translation spell, or asked any of them — Cissy, Bellatrix, Mr. Nott — but they had wanted *him* to translate it. They wanted to test his knowledge of German and French.

That sickly nagging in his gut twisted again.

Lucius leaned forward, his eyes cold and sharp. "We’re focusing on Wing A and C. When trouble arises in Wing A, she will be moved to Wing C."

Regulus blinked, his brow furrowing. “She? Aren’t we freeing Rodolphus and Mr. Carrow?”

Mr. Nott, now sitting casually with a cigar in hand, exhaled a cloud of smoke. “No, Regulus. Rodolphus and Cletus weren’t accidentally imprisoned. It was all part of a greater plan.”

Regulus froze, his mind racing to keep up with the sudden shift in direction.

“There’s someone we want to free from Hohenhain,” Mr. Nott continued, his voice taking on an almost conspiratorial tone, “a spy. But freeing her would raise suspicion. The other side would take notice.”

Regulus’s mind was struggling to keep up with all the information and the newly forming questions.

“So, we arranged for Rodolphus and Cletus to be captured. Their imprisonment is a cover, Regulus. We free them, and our real target will pretend to have… seized the opportunity and escaped on her own. No one will realise that we have freed her on purpose.”

Regulus nodded, his mind reeling, foggy with all the questions forming in his head. Where were they going with this? Why him? Why was he the one sitting here?

Yaxley, leaning back with a smug expression, chipped in. “So, it’s simple. Carrow and Rodolphus are in Wing A. We cause trouble, they get moved to Wing C, and once they’re there, we take care of our real target. And then, party time.”

Regulus’s stomach lurched.

Then, with a flourish, Mr. Nott placed a moving picture on the table.

It was a man — roughly in his forties, plain-looking. His short beard and mousy brown hair did nothing to disguise the harsh lines of his face.

“This man,” Mr. Nott said, his tone more serious now, “is far more important than Rodolphus or Cletus, though.”

Regulus frowned. “Who is he?”

“He’s the most important guard in Hohenhain,” Lucius explained. “We captured him, extracted every bit of useful information from him, and then Obliviated him.”

Regulus’s gaze shifted between the others, trying to make sense of it. “Won’t that… resurface?”

Mr. Nott smirked, the edges of his mouth curling as he flicked ash from his cigar. “He’ll have the occasional odd sensation, perhaps some strange gaps in memory. But he has no reason to believe he’s been Obliviated. Even if he were to piece things together, he’d need something far more difficult than simple magic to get his memories back.”

Bellatrix leaned forward, her lips curling into a malicious sneer. “Pity. It would’ve been *so* much more fun to just play a bit with him and kill him off.”

Regulus couldn’t help but frown. Why hadn’t she just killed him, then? Bellatrix was hardly known for her self-restraint when it came to torturing or murdering people.

The Dark Lord turned his gaze on her. “You’ll have your chance soon enough, Bella.”

Regulus was utterly confused — which was, apparently, plain on his face.

“We need him, Regulus,” Mr. Nott explained. “He’s the key to getting in.”

Regulus blinked. “How?”

The Dark Lord’s voice was low, a glint of something dark flashing in his eyes. “We needed his information. Now we need his… body.”

Regulus’s confusion only deepened, his brow furrowing as he tried to piece the puzzle together.

The Dark Lord’s lips curled into a smile, the kind that sent shivers down Regulus’s spine. “Polyjuice Potion.”

That was when it clicked. Regulus’s heart skipped a beat, his breath catching in his throat as his mind tried to digest the enormity of what they were suggesting.

“We’re going to *impersonate* him?” Regulus asked.

The Dark Lord’s laugh was soft, low, chilling. “No, Regulus.”

He paused, his eyes gleaming with the wrong kind of amusement.

“*You* are going to impersonate him.”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaah things are happeningggggg.

Very curious what you guys are thinking (and whether you liked reading the scene with Evan/Barty and Miller as much as I enjoyed writing it haha).

Prepare for angst and drama in the next chapter.

Lots of love!

Chapter 17: Of Detachment & Fists

Chapter Notes

Much later than I'd hoped but here we go - the next chapter!

I'm bursting with inspiration and I've plotted everything in detail and I just can't wait to share it with you guys but life's sooo busy right now. The next chapter will be quicker, though (I'm aiming for Thursday evening).

Let me know what you think

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus's brain was a strange thing after. The world blurred at the edges, life was a haze, and time was treacherous. He barely remembered returning to Hogwarts that Sunday afternoon, and the days that followed weren't much better — most of it simply didn't register, as if his mind refused to store it at all. Everything he did was on autopilot, the lack of sleep and sheer dread keeping him in a constant state of detachment, like he was watching himself from a distance.

And then there were other moments — sharp, inescapable — that etched themselves into his memory with eerie precision. Tiny, meaningless details that refused to fade, burned into his mind until the very last detail.

Regulus considered himself a master at pretending, at schooling his features, at making his voice sound just right, at laughing in conversation without meaning a single note of it. No one would notice his inner turmoil, the dread eating away at him — not even Barty and Evan.

But three people could.

There were three people who could read him too well. Three people who at some time had known understood him effortlessly, or still did.

And he would face all three of them in Potions class the next day.

The fight with Isa was a blessing in disguise, of course. She went to

great lengths to avoid him — sitting with Amaryllis and Melania further down the table during meals, doing her homework on the opposite side of the common room, giving him a wide berth in the halls and not visibly acknowledging his existence when they were forced to sit together in class. Some part of him wanted to explain, to clarify what he'd meant that night in the dorm, to fix things. But another part — the stronger part— was grateful, grateful for the distance, because if she got too close, she would see

But then there were Sirius and James.

Sure, he and Sirius were strangers now, barely had a clue what was going on in each other's lives. But once they had been inseparable, once Sirius had known what Regulus was about to say before he'd even said it. The fact that they were in different Houses, ran in different circles and were now estranged had guaranteed a certain distance between them — safeguarding that Regulus was spared from having to face the brother who, undoubtedly, still had the ability to read him too well. But being stuck at a table with him for two full hours meant there was no escape.

And then there was James. James, who always seemed caught between the desire to reach out and the knowledge that he shouldn't. Caught between the hope to save the brother he'd given his heart to and the knowing he had betrayed the other brother by having done so. James, whose eyes followed him in corridors, who was always watching, always gauging, always assessing. Always trying, in his own way, to make sure Regulus was all right.

You are going to impersonate him.

In two weeks, on Saturday, the nightmare would begin.

He understood. He understood why they had chosen him.

The guard spoke French and German, and while Polyjuice Potions could change someone's body, it didn't come with a sudden fluency in either language. There were others who spoke both languages — the most prominent being Bellatrix and Mr. Nott — but they were too valuable elsewhere. Regulus was to stay undercover; no one could know he was the one setting the prisoners free, meaning he couldn't fight unless it was an absolute last resort. And once it became clear something was happening, new wards would be raised — wards that only Mr. Nott could break. And then Aurors would arrive, so Bellatrix would be needed for the fight.

So it had to be Regulus.

And he understood. Understood that it had to be him. But the thought of infiltrating one of the most secure magical prisons in existence was so terrifying, so incomprehensible, that sometimes he convinced himself it wasn't real. That it was all just one long, twisted nightmare.

And it *was*.

It *was* one big, twisted nightmare — except this time, there was no waking up.

Alone and with dread curling up his spine like a cold hand, Regulus made his way to Potions on Monday evening. He had timed his arrival precisely — he'd walk in the moment class began. If he was lucky, no one would focus on him for more than a fleeting second.

"Ah, Mr. Black!" Slughorn greeted warmly as he stepped inside.

Regulus gave a curt nod, avoiding eye contact with anyone as he made his way to the last empty seat at the damned table. He kept his expression neutral and distant while focusing solely on his Head of House.

Slughorn, as jovial as ever, clapped his hands together. "Now then, my dear students, for our next major project — Felix Felicis!"

Slughorn was clearly waiting for some grande reaction from the six students, but nothing came.

He quickly composed himself and continued, "Now, as you may know, Felix Felicis is an incredibly complex potion that requires meticulous attention over a long period. But — good news! — I've already handled the preparatory work, so with careful maintenance, yours will be completed just before the end of the year."

Regulus sighed.

"That being said," Slughorn went on, "this potion must be closely monitored. Every other day, a pair will check on it, make adjustments if necessary, and ensure the brewing conditions remain optimal. To encourage collaboration, pairs will rotate every month, so you all have the opportunity to work with different partners."

Regulus resisted the urge to grimace. The idea of being paired, of being *alone* with anyone of this group was unpleasant enough. Isa,

Sirius, James… The thought made his stomach tighten. Amaryllis was a little bit better but she was nosy and surely she knew something was going on between Isa and Regulus.

So funnily enough, Evans was the best option.

Regulus almost laughed at the absurdity of it — the absurdity of Mudblood Evans being the best option in the composition of this group.

"Alongside our work on Felix Felicis," Slughorn continued, "we will also be focusing on brewing Veritaserum. Today marks the day of the New Moon, which means we can start the brewing process. Instructions are on the board — and, of course, better go ahead and pair up for your Felix Felicis rotations!"

Regulus was very glad that the world was apparently taking pity on him, for all the students in the room apparently had the same thoughts regarding the pairs.

Isa had raised her hand immediately, her tone way too eager. “We’ll be a team, Professor!” she said, pointing between her and Amaryllis.

Regulus instantly felt the sharp state James turned on him, sensing something was wrong. Sirius looked slightly baffled for the same reason, but was quick in smoothing his features back into something unbothered.

Regulus ignored both of them and kept his gaze fixed on the Professor.

“We will pair up, Professor,” Sirius said, nodding at James.

“Wonderful!” Slughorn beamed.

Regulus finally looked up, catching Evans’s gaze. He gave the slightest nod. She returned it.

"Ah, splendid!" Slughorn beamed. "Miss Evans and Mr. Black — what a *wonderful* demonstration of House unity, as always!"

Regulus and Evans exchanged a glance, both thinking of the last time Slughorn had said something similar — at the soirée.

To his utter surprise, they both bit back a laugh.

*****

Now, as if being the Black Heir, the youngest Revolutionary with the Mark seared into his arm, and the key player in an impending prison break of one of the world's most secure magical prisons wasn't enough — Regulus had something else to worry about.

Quidditch.

It seemed utterly trivial, almost laughable, to be concerned with a game while there were so much more important things gnawing at his mind and consuming his time and energy, but well, he was the Captain and could hardly *not* show up. No one could connect him to the Revolution, no one could link him to the upcoming event that would shake the wizarding world — so he had to go on. Apart from the few days next week, when he'd slip away to Switzerland to refine his accent, everything had to continue as usual.

Besides, Regulus was a proud person, so he really did want to win.

Slytherin had lost to Gryffindor, and Hufflepuff had lost to Ravenclaw — meaning if they managed to smash Ravenclaw, they'd secure second place behind Gryffindor. And he was proud of his team. Lively had improved considerably, the Carrows were solid, and the Chasers… Well, truth be told, Regulus could hardly wait to show the entire school how incredible Miller was.

To prove that, despite being a Mudblood and having had so little opportunity to fly in her life, the only Chaser who could still outfly her was James Potter. To silence the doubters, to shut up the taunts that followed here everywhere she went and Regulus didn't.

So, some small part of him was excited for the match. Not much, though. The feeling was nearly swallowed whole by the stress and anxiety of the upcoming week.

On Tuesday, Cissy would reach out to Slughorn, feigning that things at home were going downhill with Mother. That would secure Regulus a few days' leave from Hogwarts — days he'd spend in Switzerland, mastering the Swiss-German and French accents, shadowing the prison guard in his personal life. Watching how he spoke, how he interacted, how he moved — all to ensure that when the time came, he wouldn't blow his cover.

Saturday. A normal Saturday afternoon in February.

No one would suspect a thing.

But now — now he was standing before his team, just outside the locker room before everyone would change their shoes, get their brooms and head to the pitch. Now, he was focusing on the match, on Quidditch, on the feigned normalcy of his life — and he'd focus so hard, concentrate so *deeply* that it almost felt as if his life *was* normal. That the reality that would catch up on him in a matter of days did not exist at all. That he was just a normal teenager at Hogwarts for whom nothing was more important than winning that Cup — as it should have been.

As it could have been — in another life.

The others headed into the locker room, but Regulus lingered, stopping Miller before she could follow. Regulus knew that this was probably the last chance to speak to her alone before the match, and well — he didn't want to tell her as didn't want to spook her — but the outcome of the game more or less rested on her shoulders. Regulus had no doubt he'd outfly Hufflepuff's Seeker with ease, but the Chasers' goals would determine the final score and well, he'd pinned all his hopes on her.

Unsurprisingly, she looked pale and nervous. Her hands were shaking.

Regulus caught her wrists in an attempt to calm her down. The movement and touch were still slightly awkward, but the fact that he'd chosen physical contact in order to calm her down said a lot about how close they'd become in just a few months.

Miller swallowed and avoided his gaze — until Regulus practically forced her to look at him.

"You're going to smash it, Miller," he said firmly. "You're going to be brilliant. You're going to be the star of the show."

"Don't make it worse, Cap," she muttered. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Nah." Regulus smirked. "And if you are, make sure you're in the air and aim for someone on the other team."

Miller let out a breathless laugh, and some of the tension seemed to drain from her shoulders. She took a deep, steadying breath, shot him a small smile and disappeared into the locker room.

Regulus turned to follow — but just as he reached for the door, a voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Reg."

He froze.

Slowly, he turned.

James.

He was standing just outside the locker room, pulling off his cloak.

They stared at each other.

Now, the stands were practically full so most students had already made their way to the pitch. Still, someone could come by late, running into the strange sight of the Slytherin and Gryffindor Captains, standing behind the locker room, caught in some silent moment.

And yet, Regulus did nothing. Didn't move inside, didn't tell James off. Just stood there, rooted to the spot, unable to move, unable to speak, completely overwhelmed by the sudden ache of it — of this. He hadn't been alone with James in so long. Hadn't been close to him like this, either.

James broke the silence first.

"You're a brilliant captain, you know," he said, his voice calm, steady — somewhere between comforting and proud. "The way you spoke to her just now. And I've seen you together a lot — in the corridors, at meals."

Regulus nodded, a bit too stunned to say anything.

James studied him. "She's Muggleborn, you know," he pointed out.

"I know."

"Is that why?" James asked. "Is that why you've taken her under your wing?"

Regulus exhaled as he suddenly realised what that meant. Such a simple observation, such a seemingly innocent question. But Regulus knew exactly what lay underneath.

And that was not simple at all.

"Don't do that, James."

James frowned. "Do what?"

"Don’t go looking for the good in me."

Silence stretched between them, heavy and painful. They both knew what those words really meant.

James gave a small, wry smile. His gaze was steady, searching. "I don’t have to look for it, Reg. It’s right there on the surface."

Regulus took a slow, cautious step back.

He couldn’t deal with this now. James evoked too many emotions, too many sensations he couldn’t name, let alone face. He had a match to play, a mission to prepare for. He couldn’t do this. He couldn’t risk opening that Pandora’s box, couldn’t rip the bandage off before the wound had even begun to heal.

Not now.

James lowered his voice, barely more than a whisper. "Are you alright, Reg? I… You don’t… I feel like you’re not alright."

For a split second, Regulus wanted to break.

Wanted to drop his broom, step forward, bury his face in James’s beautiful, broad, comforting shoulder and *cry* . Cry for all the choices he’d made from his childhood on, to all the ones that had been made for him. Cry for everything twisted and conflicted and wrong that had happened to him, that he had allowed to happen to him, everything he had been made to do in the past.

And for all the things he would still have to do.

But he didn’t. Because there was no point. It wouldn’t change anything. It would only make things worse.

This was his fate. The path laid out for him the moment Sirius had gone astray. And he would have to walk it. Walk it through all the thorns and shadows, all the treacherous turns, and all the sickening things that he’d come across along the way.

So he swallowed the bile in his throat and forced down the sting behind his eyes.

"Look, James, I need to go — they’re waiting for me. The match."

James hesitated, then nodded quickly. "Yeah. Yeah, of course. Sorry — go."

Regulus gave a short nod, turned, and walked towards the locker room.

But just as he reached the door—

"You're the star, you know."

Regulus stilled, his hand on the doorknob.

He didn't turn around, didn't look back. He kept his gaze fixed on the door he was about to walk through.

James's voice was quiet, but clear.

"You said Miller would be the star of the show." He paused. "But you are." Then, his voice turned even softer. "For me, you are the star, Reg."

Regulus winced.

Because he didn't just hear James's voice in those words.

He heard Sirius's, too.

"I might be the brightest star in the sky, but you're the brightest one on earth, Reggie."

*****

Regulus was positive that James had come up to him to cheer him on, to encourage him, to lift his spirits before the match, but instead, he had done the exact opposite.

Not that the match had gone poorly — on the contrary, it had gone spectacularly well, phenomenal even. Ravenclaw's greatest weakness was their Keeper, and Slytherin's greatest strength was their Chasers, which meant that, within thirty minutes, it was abundantly clear to everyone that Ravenclaw was about to be utterly crushed. Miller pulled off the most insane dives, weaving through the air in a way that even had James Potter gawking from the stands. Lively was more confident too, blocking goal after goal, and the Carrow twins were at the top of their game, diverting the Quaffle back to Slytherin time and time again.

Yes, the match went spectacular. In theory, it should have been thrilling to watch their hard work pay off. And, truth be told, it was a relief to prove to the entire school that he was a capable Captain and to make up for the humiliating loss against Gryffindor.

And yet.

Regulus couldn't fully join in the celebration. He couldn't feel the rush, the triumph, the exhilaration of winning with an overwhelming lead in record time.

Because Regulus felt more alone than he'd felt in years.

He had lost the people who had mattered most.

He had lost his brother. He had lost him a long time ago, of course, but now it felt more real than ever. In a matter of months, he wouldn't see Sirius again, unless they met on the battlefield. It wouldn't just be two estranged brothers avoiding each other's gaze in the halls. It would be two soldiers on opposite sides of a war. They, who had once been inseparable, would be forced to raise their wands against each other, the green light erupting from their wands making their separation infinite, irreversible, everlasting.

He had lost James. He knew it was going to happen from the start. Knew where it was going to lead already at their first Quidditch screening in that Charms classroom. Already before they had kissed for the first time. And now it felt more definitive than ever. Because, like Sirius, James would soon be gone from his life forever. The fleeting moments in the corridors, in the Great Hall, the scarce quick conversation didn't even come close to what Regulus really wanted, but at least they were something. In a few months, he wouldn't even have that anymore. And like Sirius, if they ever met again after Hogwarts, it would be across the battlefield.

The modernist hero and the Black heir, with nothing left between them but the memory of first love and the inevitably of war.

And now he was losing Isa too. Or perhaps he had lost her already, he wasn't sure.

He did know, though, that she was the most important one. The one who truly knew most. The one who truly understood him best. Yes, Sirius knew a version of Regulus that neither James or Isa were acquainted with. And James knew Regulus in an intimate way Sirius — being his brother — didn't, but that neither Isa did — because she

hadn't been his first. It had been James. Isa hadn't been the one with whom he had gone to explore, gone to heal a part that had been destroyed by his childhood. No, that he had done, that he had overcome with James — *because* of James. And no one but him and James would ever understand that.

But Isa did know a lot that neither Sirius nor James knew. She understood the reality of their world in a way that Sirius no longer did and James never had. She knew the truth of Regulus's role in it — and sometimes, she understood it better than he did himself.

And he had lost her.

So it was with a foul mood and a reluctance bordering on self-destruction that Regulus eventually dragged himself to the Slytherin victory party thrown, more or less, in his honour. The last thing he wanted was to be trapped in a room full of plastered students eager to strike up cheerful conversation and jovial banter, but he didn't have much of a choice. He was the Captain and it was the victory party. He owed his team a drink at the very least.

As always, Barty and Evan had joined forces with Avery, Mulciber and Celine's group of friends to decorate the common room, to spike half of the drinks and to persuade the House Elves to make an absurd amount of snacks. And, as always, his friends had dragged out the horrific banners in his honour. Regulus eyed the *No Flop with Black on Top!* with visible dismay.

He arrived late; the common room was already heaving with bodies. The dance floor was packed, music from the wireless thumped off the walls and Barty's loud and unrestrained laughter — the one following a couple of drinks — already echoed across the room.

He made sure to locate his team mates instantly and offered them compliments and handshakes, so that, if he snuck out now, at least he'd have shown up and had done what was expected of him.

Eventually, everyone drifted off to do their own thing. The Carrow twins made a beeline for the drinks table, which — being guarded by Barty and Mulciber —was arguably the worst place for two impressionable teenagers. And indeed, it didn't take long before they were roped into some ludicrous drinking game. Regulus shot Barty a warning glare, which Barty answered with a lopsided grin and a set of unapologetically twinkling eyes.

The other teammates dispersed, except for Miller. She lingered

awkwardly at his side, looking torn between staying with Regulus or just leaving the party altogether.

“What’s up, Miller?” Regulus asked, offering her a Butterbeer.

She took it with a small, polite smile. “Nothing, Cap. Just tired.”

Regulus narrowed his eyes slightly. “Doesn’t sound like nothing.”

Miller exhaled, shoulders slumping a little. “I thought it’d change, you know?”

“What would?” he asked, having a very solid idea of where this was going.

She shifted on her feet, avoiding his gaze. “Well, I thought that if we won, people would… be different.”

“You mean…” He paused. “You thought people would treat you differently?”

She nodded, quietly. “Yeah. After the Gryffindor match, people weren’t exactly nice. I figured maybe it was because we lost. But now we’ve won, and… nothing’s changed.”

Anger surged in him, fast and hot. “Who?” he asked sharply. “

“Cap—” Miller shook her head, gaze darting around. “You can’t do anything about it.”

Regulus snorted. She had no idea whom she was dealing with. “Of course I can.”

“No,” she said quickly. “You don’t get it. They already think of me as…”

“As what?”

She hesitated, then said it so quietly he almost missed it. “As your charity case.”

Regulus stilled.

The words knocked the breath out of him.

He had never considered that seeking her out, sitting with her in the Great Hall, walking her to practice might have made things worse.

He stared at her. “Who are they, Miller?”

She rolled her eyes, trying to brush it off. “No one. Just… forget it, Cap. Let’s just enjoy the party.”

*****

Regulus, in fact, did not enjoy the party.

He tried nearly everything. He danced a bit with Miller and Barty, and although the latter was actually hilarious, it wasn’t enough to lift his spirits. He chatted briefly with Severus, but he vanished to the dormitory halfway through the evening.

And Isa…

He stayed as far from her as possible. The few times their eyes locked across the room, she sent him a look that made it very clear she didn’t have a single thought to spare for him. She looked ridiculous and beautiful at the same time. She wore a jumper dipping off one shoulder and a skirt that was far too short, and Regulus didn’t try in the slightest to hide his opinion on the matter from his expression.

So in the end, he turned to the thing he hadn’t tried yet but others always swore worked.

He drank.

He joined some idiotic drinking game with Barty, Evan, Mulciber and Avery — all of whom were far too delighted that Regulus Black was finally joining them. They cheered as he downed a glass of some foul, syrupy poison that Mulciber claimed was imported. He toasted awkwardly with Lively, who looked as unsure about it all as he felt, and he made sure, always, to have a drink in his hand. It didn’t matter what, just so long as his hands weren’t empty and his mind was.

Now, Regulus wasn’t drunk often. In fact, he had been drunk precisely once in his life — during that infamous night of the L-O-V-E incident. He’d assumed, from that deeply humiliating display of vulnerability, that that was just how he was when he drank; a soppy, tragic, love-declaring idiot. It was incredibly embarrassing, but at least it had been harmless.

Apparently, he’d been wrong, though.

Because this time — his second time — Regulus Black was a very

different sort of drunk. He wasn't soppy, nor tragic. He was furious.

It started with small things. A sharp snap at Sylas Selwyn when the bloke bumped into him too roughly on the way to the drinks table. A quiet, venomous glare cast at Isa when she laughed at something a bloke whispered in her ear. A sharp warning at Barty when he tried to pour yet another drink for the visibly swaying Carrow twins.

So, the frustration, the rage, the anger — it was already there, thrumming, constant.

But it was when he saw Crabbe speaking to Miller that it all came to a head.

Regulus had been making his way toward the snack table — partly to escape a group of giggling seventh-year girls who kept trying to pull him into a dance, partly because he needed something solid in his stomach before he tipped over — when he caught sight of Miller near the edge of the dance floor. She stood awkwardly, half turned away from Crabbe, the latter's frame way too close to her. Miller's shoulders were stiff, her arms were clutched tight to her chest.

And although the music and chatter filled the air loud enough for them not to be overheard, Regulus was close enough to hear it.

"You're lucky Black's taken a liking to you," Crabbe was saying, voice low but clear in Regulus's ears. "If you weren't his little pet, you'd have been dealt with already."

Regulus froze, the words slicing through the haze of alcohol. His brain took a second too long to register, too foggy to intervene fast enough.

"I don't know why you keep going after me," Miller said quietly, her voice trembling. "I haven't done anything wrong."

Crabbe leaned in. "You exist, you filthy Mudblood. That's wrong enough."

Suddenly, Regulus wasn't slow anymore.

The rage surged up, black and bottomless. It overtook him.

Rage for Miller — clever, kind, and talented — who was treated as lesser for something she had no control over. Rage for the taunts, the slurs, the glares, and the sabotage she'd had to pretend not to notice from people like bloody Crabbe or Selwyn, who didn't even come

close to her talent.

Rage for this party he truly didn't want to attend. Rage for the prospect of his mission just a few days away. The rage for having to fill shoes that were way too big. Rage for having had all the decisions made for him all his life — behind his back, under the sheets, over his head.

He was moving before he even realised it.

His hand fisted the front of Crabbe's robes, slamming him back against the wall so hard a few decorative mugs fell from the shelf above. Miller gasped.

The entire common room stilled in an instant.

Students turned. Music blared on, but no one heard it. Everyone watched.

Regulus's heart pounded against his ribs, loud and painful. His ears buzzed with white-hot fury.

"If you *ever* come near her again," he said, voice low, dangerous, "I will fucking kill you, Crabbe."

Crabbe blinked, stunned, fear flashing in his eyes. But then he rallied, his lip curling. "Or what, Black?" he sneered. "Gonna defend your Mudblood girlfriend?"

Regulus barely heard Barty and Evan calling his name in the distance.

He didn't care.

His hand shot to Crabbe's throat, shoving him harder into the stone wall. Crabbe choked out a sound, both hands gripping at Reg's wrist, eyes now wide and frantic.

Regulus didn't let go.

The entire common room watched in shock. Regulus couldn't blame them. It wasn't every day that he — the collected, reserved Black heir — hauled a dorm mate up by the collar and slammed him against the wall, fingers wrapped tight around his throat.

"Say that again," Regulus hissed, tightening his grip.

"Reg." Evan was at his side now, a hand on his shoulder. "Let go."

Regulus didn't move.

Then Crabbe muttered something again. Regulus didn't catch the words, but the tone was enough for the fury to surge up again, white-hot and blinding. And well — the only way out was via his fist.

So he punched him — hard and square in his face.

And then again.

Crabbe stumbled back, blood already pouring from his nose, but Regulus didn't stop. He swung again, jaw tight, vision red.

It was Evan who pulled him back — arms wrapping around his chest, dragging him away with effort.

"Reg," Evan said urgently. "Enough."

Regulus fought against him, breathing hard, his limbs twitching with the impulse to keep going. His body strained forward, trembling, the fury coursing through him like lightning.

Barty stepped between them, face unusually serious, arms spread wide.

"Alright, Crabbe, fuck off unless you want another round."

Crabbe, blood streaming down his face, gave Regulus a murderous look but didn't argue. Selwyn caught him by the arm and hauled him away. The two of them disappeared through the common room entrance without a word.

Evan turned to Avery and nodded, getting the message. He cranked up the music.

"Nothing to see here!" Evan shouted over the thrum of bass. "Back to your drinks, back to the dancing. Go on!"

The crowd, stunned and uncertain, slowly began to stir again, the music pulling them back into motion. Regulus stood there, too drunk and too angry to fully register the shift.

Barty glanced at Regulus. "You alright, mate?"

Regulus's knuckles were throbbing. His breathing was heavy. His hand, curled into a bloody fist, trembled.

He almost wanted to laugh.

Was he alright?

Evan leaned in, voice low, gentle. “Let’s get out of here for a bit, yeah?”

“Honestly,” Barty muttered, glancing at the blood on Regulus’s hand, “that was fucking satisfying to watch.”

Evan shot him a look.

Regulus shook his head, stepping back from them both. “No. I — I’m going to the dorm for a bit, yeah. Can you two just… look after Miller?”

Barty and Evan exchanged a glance, then nodded.

“Yeah,” Evan said softly. “Course.”

Regulus turned and walked, forcing himself not to stumble, though the world swayed beneath his feet. His skull buzzed and his body burned.

Shit, he was drunk. Properly, stupidly plastered.

The moment the door to the dorm closed behind him, the panic slammed into him.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He had punched Crabbe — in front of *everyone* . In defence of Miller. A Mudblood. He had laid hands on Mr. Crabbe’s son. Mr. Crabbe who ran in the same circles as Mother and Father.

Shit.

He paced, chest tight, mind reeling. His hand throbbed. He wasn’t even sure if it was bruised or broken. He flexed his fingers, then hissed as pain lanced up his wrist.

Fuck. Shit. Fuck.

His mind spun, dragging him back through every second of it — the look on Crabbe’s face, the gasp from Miller, the *rage* .

He was so immersed by his thoughts that he barely heard the door creak open.

Isa stepped in without hesitation, her expression unreadable.

Regulus froze.

She pinned him with a glare — cold, cutting, sharp enough to skin him alive. He couldn't tell if he wanted to lash out or crawl inside himself and disappear.

So, he didn't move.

He stood frozen as she crossed the room, her gaze dropping to his hand. He saw it in her eyes — the flicker of sadness, of recognition. The understanding that even though he hadn't said anything, she knew.

She reached for him, fingers curling gently around his wrist.

Regulus stiffened, his breath caught at her touch.

Something in him wanted to pull away, to tell her to leave. But the part that ached for her to stay — the part of him knowing that she was one of the only good things left — was stronger. So he didn't. He couldn't.

Isa's fingers ghosted over his swollen knuckles, her brow furrowing as she tilted his hand to examine it.

"You're going through it, aren't you, Reg?" she murmured, eyes still on his hand.

He let out a short, mirthless snort.

She didn't say anything more, but instead just raised her wand, murmuring an incantation under her breath.

A soft, golden light pulsed at the tip, and he felt it immediately — the warmth seeping into his skin, the pain lessening. The swelling went down and the bruising almost completely faded. All that was left now was a low thrum.

She lowered her wand after a moment and exhaled.

Isa didn't look him in the eyes. "Alright. It's healed."

Regulus flexed his fingers."Thanks," he said, his voice quiet and his throat dry.

Silence.

It stretched between them, thick and charged.

And then they locked eyes.

He looked at her — really looked at her.

Her eyes were dark, but not cold. They were gentle, wry, anxious and anticipatory all at once. There was something in them that Regulus couldn't quite decipher.

She was still holding his hand. Neither of them had let go.

It wasn't a premeditated move, he didn't even think before doing it, but something in him — either his subconsciousness or just simply the liquor — made him tug, slowly and carefully.

Isa let out a small, almost intimate, breath of surprise as he pulled her closer — closer, until she was on his lap, her thighs bracketing his.

His pulse roared.

He looked down at her off-shoulder jumper, the way the fabric bunched slightly as she settled against him, her skirt brushing his legs. It felt achingly familiar — like that night in his bedroom at Black Manor. Although then, of course, there had been fewer clothes between them.

He swallowed hard, heat coiling low in his stomach, pressing tight in his gut at the memory of her riding him — her breathy moans, her skin against his hands, the sound of his name on her lips.

Isa stilled, her breath shallow. He could feel it — the shift in her. That sudden quiet tilt in the air, loaded and electric.

Slowly — achingly slow — he leaned in. Not to her mouth, but to her neck. He could hear her heart pumping in her chest as he brushed over her collarbone, the barest graze of warmth against her silky skin.

She shivered.

He felt her respond immediately — her body tensing, then softening into heat, her hands twitching where they rested on his shoulders.

And she felt him — the unmistakable press of his arousal, hard and insistent, separated only by a few frustrating layers of fabric.

Isa’s breath hitched.

Regulus reached up, brushing a strand of hair away from her face. His fingers traced the curve of her ear, slow and deliberate. He felt her trembling beneath his touch.

He leaned in, his lips grazing the shell of her ear, his voice low and dark, barely more than a whisper.

“Take off your clothes, Ies.”

Chapter End Notes

Poor Reg. he's going through it, isn't he?

Chapter 18: Of Shakespeare & Touches

Chapter Notes

As promised, a new chapter on Thursday!

I have a harder time writing angst these days, which is really unfortunate, considering Reg is like angst incarnate. it's too bad too because it's angst where I really thrive but well. It's the sign of a good thing too, I guess, because having a harder time writing dark/angsty stuff often means I'm a in very good place mentally. So good even that when I was pulled over for speeding the other day I was in such a good mood that I was hit with a drug/breath test. Apparently you're not allowed to be that cheerful when the state's about to rip you off the equivalent of a kidney??

Anyhow without further ado....

Lots of love, as always!

❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Regulus woke up the next morning, he was met with two profoundly unwelcome realities.

The first was the sensation in his head — a pounding, echoing thrum so violent it felt like his skull was trying to break up with his brain. The second — equally bad — was the grating, nasally voice of Crabbe, who appeared to be in the middle of an obscenely loud argument with Evan and Barty.

It took Regulus an embarrassingly long time to parse any of the words due to his barely functioning brain — a nice side-effect of the night before.

“I don’t care if he was drunk,” Crabbe snapped, voice climbing into that particular pitch that made Regulus want to hex something, especially now. “What the fuck was that?”

Evan let out a long, suffering sigh. “Oh, come on, he was completely pissed. You can’t blame him for anything. Honestly, I’m surprised he remembered how to throw a punch.”

Regulus was not quite sure whether to join the argument or pretend to be asleep. His limbs felt like they’d been hexed by a full-body petrificus and his brain was too slow to decide, so he just lay there, eyes half-shut, face mashed into the pillow, and let the argument play on.

“I recall,” Barty drawled helpfully, “*you* vomiting into the fireplace at the last party, Crabbe.”

Crabbe didn’t take the bait. “I haven’t ever punched my dorm mates like a bloody Muggle in defence of a *Mudblood*.”

Well, that shut everyone up.

For a moment, the entire dorm was quiet — the air thick with the collective memory of Regulus Black decking his dorm mate square in the face for the only Mudblood in Slytherin.

“Well,” Evan said eventually, his voice uncertain but impressively quick-thinking considering he, too, had had a few drinks the night prior. “You realise she’s the best Chaser on his team, right? And he’s been saying the stress has been affecting her game.”

“Yeah,” Barty jumped in, picking up the thread instantly. It was a miracle how they managed to do that on a morning like this. “You want us to lose the bloody Cup? You want *Potter* to win? Really?”

“Oh, piss off, you’ve seen how friendly they look together, right?”

There was a new edge to Barty’s voice now — cool, sharp, unmistakably dangerous. “What exactly are you trying to say?”

Crabbe’s voice was heavy with false innocence. “Just saying. It’s weird. All of it.”

“This is *Regulus Black* you’re talking about,” Barty said coldly. “The Black Heir.”

Crabbe snorted. “Yeah, well, *Sirius Black* was the Black heir once too, wasn’t he? And look what he did.”

Evan sputtered something half-formed, but Regulus was already

moving, the panic flooding his limbs.

Because he knew Barty — knew how far he'd go to defend him, how fierce and stupidly loyal he could be. And while that loyalty was genuinely — alarmingly — sweet, it was also dangerous. Because there was one very obvious card Barty could play to prove where Regulus's allegiances lay, and well — no one was supposed to know about his involvement in the Revolution or the Dark Mark burned into his forearm.

So he had no choice. And even though Crabbe's face was the last thing he wanted to see, and sitting up made his entire body scream in protest, Regulus yanked open the bed curtains with a groan as daylight stabbed straight into his skull.

"Alright," he rasped, his voice raw, the world still tilted slightly to the left. "Yes. I was drunk. No, I shouldn't have hit you. But I want to win the Cup. And Miller's on my team. So if you give her shit, I'll deal with you."

He was acutely aware of the fact that he didn't look half as threatening as yesterday, now that he could barely open his eyes and his voice was hardly functioning.

Crabbe glared at him.

Regulus blinked at him slowly, trying not to throw up on his own lap. "It's just professional."

He wasn't sure what was more nauseating — his hangover or the guilt that mastered him at his own words.

Miller deserved more. She deserved him to say that she was a million times better than that inbred troll of a dorm mate. She deserved him to throw a neat punch just for good measure. But Crabbe was still Mr. Crabbe's son, and Regulus truly couldn't risk it.

Crabbe stood, his expression caught somewhere between pissed off and deeply confused. "Yeah, we figured that one out, Black," he said. "Since you're clearly fucking Nott."

He stalked out.

Regulus barely had time to register Crabbe's words before it hit him — like a jinx to the chest.

Isa.

A flash. Her on her knees — hair spilling over her shoulders, lips around him, fingers curled into his thigh.

Then another — her straddling him in bed, skirt hitched up around her hips, her hands gripping his shoulders as they rocked together, breathless and flushed, her mouth open in a moan.

No.

Fuck.

Regulus went very still. Blood drained from his face.

He turned to Barty and Evan, who were both watching him far too closely. The horror must've been plain on his face, because Barty's expression split into a slow, satisfied grin.

He stood near the dresser, looking unreasonably smug.

"Morning, sunshine," he drawled.

Evan was clearly trying to stifle his sniggering, but he failed badly, snorting into his sleeve. Regulus was too nauseous to dignify him with a glare.

"She left?" he croaked, glancing sideways at the empty bed beside him.

Evan shrugged. "Didn't want to wake up to Barty's pretty face, apparently. I didn't hear her leave, though."

Barty's voice was full of lazy, malicious glee. "No, that part we *didn't* hear."

Regulus's heart stuttered in panic.

"What?" he asked sharply, his voice cracking. It felt like the last drop of blood fled his already anaemic face. "What are you talking about?"

Evan and Barty exchanged a look, making Regulus's heart drop. Barty barked a laugh.

Reg groaned, already regretting everything. "Shit. What — what did you hear?"

Evan scratched the back of his neck, shifting a little like he wasn't sure if he was supposed to be embarrassed or amused."Well… at some point we thought maybe we should check on you. But Isa had already… y'know. Beat us to it."

"Oh," Regulus said faintly.

Barty nodded. "Yeah, we got to know some new sounds from you, Black."

"What?" Regulus choked, full-body mortification washing over him.

Evan laughed. "Not — not *those* sounds." He paused, then grinned. "Although… well. Also that."

Regulus let out a strangled noise and dropped his head into his hands, his face flaming.

"But Barty," Evan said dryly, "I think was referring to… the laughing."

Regulus's head snapped up. "What?"

Barty smirked, folding his arms and leaning back against the dresser like he'd been waiting for this moment for years. "You were laughing, mate. Full-on, breathless, *laughing* . Never heard our broody Black laugh like that before, have we now, Evan?"

Regulus groaned again, a new memory slamming back into him — Isa trying to shift positions, his knee slipping, them both toppling sideways, Isa shrieking in surprise as her head bounced off the duvet and her hair caught awkwardly under his arm. Both bursting into laughter, breathless and unrestrained.

He flopped backwards onto the bed, dragging a pillow over his face with a dramatic groan.

"Mulciber and his *fucking* purple poison," he mumbled into the pillow. "I'm going to die. I wish I *had* died."

"Ah, don't be bitter now," Barty said, his voice sugary-sweet and poisonous. "I *like* drunk Reg. He's a riot. You either declare your love to anyone within a two-foot radius, punch people in the face whose noses I've wanted to break for *years*, or confess your undying devotion to Nott in increasingly unholy ways."

Regulus lifted his pillow just enough to throw it directly at Barty's

head. It sailed past the wardrobe with tragic lack of force.

Barty dodged it easily, laughing broadly. “Oh no, Evan, we should definitely watch out for Black today.”

Evan burst out laughing too.

“C’mon, you’ll feel better after lunch.”

*****

Regulus did *not* feel better after lunch.

Which really shouldn’t have surprised him — today was already shaping up to be a bloody disaster *and* lunch at the Slytherin table came with facing several people Regulus would very much rather avoid.

As he walked into the Great Hall, the first thing he noticed was the abrupt quiet that settled over his House’s table. The second was the sheer number of eyes fixed on him. Apparently, there wasn’t a single soul in Slytherin who *hadn’t* seen him punch Crabbe in the face the night before — or hadn’t already heard about it from someone who had.

Regulus groaned inwardly as he realised that the story would spread like wildfire and that it’d be a matter of hours before the entire castle knew that Regulus Black had decked Crabbe in front of half the bloody common room and had threatened to kill him in defense of Miller.

Fantastic.

The first person he came across was Miller herself. She was seated halfway down the table, halfway through a cup of tea, and was flanked by her two friends whose names Regulus always ended up forgetting. Miller caught his eye and offered him a small, uncertain smile — almost apologetic. Regulus gave her a tight, awkward one in return before deliberately ignoring the expectant glances from the girls beside her.

Next were Crabbe and Selwyn, sitting stiffly at the far end of the table. Both looked like they’d swallowed something sour. Selwyn’s mouth twitched into a sneer. Crabbe just glared. Regulus glared back, daring them to say something.

But then came the worst.

Isa.

She was sitting two spots away from them, tucked between Amaryllis and Melania, her toast untouched on her plate. She glanced up for a single, fleeting second — long enough for Regulus to spot the blush creeping up her cheeks.

Barty, completely oblivious to the reality they lived in, somehow thought that sitting with the girls was a terrific idea.

Regulus reacted instantly, grabbing his arm and yanking him back with a force that surprised even himself.

“ *Not here* , you idiot,” he hissed through clenched teeth, dragging Barty further down the table.

Barty snorted, entirely unbothered. “Ooh, *touchy*, Black.”

They sat down near the end of the table, and Regulus exhaled slowly through his nose, trying to compose himself.

As if life wasn’t already bad enough — with the world’s worst hangover still pounding behind his eyes, the prospect of breaking into one of the most secure prisons in wizarding history hanging over his head like the sword of bloody Damocles and his mind intermittently ambushed by vivid, soul-wrenching flashbacks of Isadora Nott naked and doing absolutely unspeakable things to him — he also had a mountain of homework to get through.

Two essays — one for Charms, the other for Transfiguration — were due by Friday, and he’d be out most of the week.

If he made it out alive at all. Otherwise, he’d be out for eternity.

He tried very hard not to dwell on that part.

So, for once, the stack of homework waiting for him was almost… comforting. A very welcome distraction.

Still, he didn’t fancy doing his homework in a room where everyone stared at him all the time, so the common room was no option. The dorm was no good either, not with Selwyn and Crabbe likely sulking inside and ready to hex him out of spite. Isa was probably in the library — and he also very much wasn’t ready for that interaction.

So, he ended up somewhere he hadn't been in weeks: the Charms classroom on the third floor.

Regulus sat down and quickly dove into his Transfiguration essay, focusing on advanced object-to-animal reversal. The theory was difficult and dense — to be expected of McGonagall — but it was exactly what he needed; something hard enough to distract him from everything else.

Time passed quickly. Once both essays were finished, he allowed himself a small reward in the form of a few chapters of leisure reading.

He reached into his bag and pulled out *Coriolanus* by Shakespeare — one of the plays Marie-Anne had coaxed him into buying during the holidays. She'd been on a mission to get him into Shakespeare since the day they'd met, and while he usually preferred political philosophy over flowery prose, *Coriolanus* had managed to hook him. It was, after all, about politics and a Roman general, so Marie-Anne really hadn't needed to pull out the big weapons to get him to buy the book.

He was so immersed in a passage — the one where Coriolanus stands in the forum, torn between appealing to the plebeians and remaining loyal to himself — that he almost didn't register the sound of the classroom door creaking open. *Almost.*

Because his hand still shot for his wand on instinct, and before his foggy, still slightly hungover brain could make a better call, he cast the first jinx that came to mind — which was, alarmingly so, not an impressive or particularly menacing spell but… a Tickling Hex.

There was a sharp yelp.

Regulus blinked.

Lupin was still doubled over, half-laughing, half-gasping in the doorway.

Regulus, suddenly struck by the very real horror of throwing a *Tickling Hex* at an intruder, scrambled to lift the spell. "Shit — sorry," he said, voice more stunned than apologetic. "That was just… automatic, I guess."

Lupin straightened slowly, eyes narrowing. A mix of alarm and glaring annoyance crossed his face.

“Bloody hell, man,” he said flatly. “Are you *serious*?”

Regulus blinked at him, still mid-hangover, pulse still thrumming from being startled — and before he could help himself, before he could *think*, the words just flew out of his mouth.

“No. I’m Regulus, actually.”

Silence.

Utter, dead, unbearable silence.

Regulus froze. Mortified. Appalled at his own brain for allowing the sentence to pass through unchecked. What the *fuck*.

Lupin was staring at him, lips parted slightly. And then — oh, *no* — the corners of his mouth twitched. His eyes lit up with dangerous amusement.

“Oh my god,” he said slowly, eyebrows raised. “The disease runs in the family.”

Regulus scowled, wishing for a quick and painless death. He shot him a glare instead.

Lupin’s eyes drifted down, landing on the now closed book in Regulus’s lap.

The amusement in his expression deepened. “You’re reading Shakespeare?”

Regulus felt the blood drain from his face. He rolled his eyes in annoyance. “So what?” he snapped. “It’s not Romeo and Juliet.”

Lupin gave him a knowing, maddening smirk. “Ah. So you *are* acquainted with that one, then.”

Regulus turned sharply toward him, face full of scorn. “What are you even doing here?”

Lupin sighed, stepping further into the room a bit warily. “I study here sometimes. The common room’s too noisy on Sundays. And in the library I get stalked by people in my year who want help with their essays.”

Regulus raised an eyebrow, tone dry. “You’re good at classes?”

“Apparently good enough,” Lupin replied, dragging out the words as he moved to one of the desks. “Well enough to be begged for tutoring.”

An awkward silence fell.

Regulus studied him. Lupin always looked a bit… tired. Pale, with dark circles under his eyes. His jumper was slightly too large, sleeves pushed up over lean forearms. He looked rough around the edges, but not unkempt. And — Regulus hated to admit it — rather handsome.

“Do you mind if I sit?” Lupin asked, gentler now. “I can sit at the other end of the room, if you’d rather. I won’t bother you.”

Regulus was torn. Part of him wanted to jinx him again just on principle. But another part — the more rational one — realised it didn’t matter. They weren’t going to talk. They wouldn’t forget the reality of the world. The reality of Lupin belonging with Sirius and James, and Regulus very much *not* belonging with them. Surely Lupin was intelligent enough to avoid bringing up the fact he knew about him and James.

So, he gave a stiff nod and turned back to his book.

Lupin slid into a seat, maybe three rows behind him. And then—

“I never took you as one to read Shakespeare,” he said.

Regulus stiffened. His eyes didn’t leave the page. “Never took you as one to judge a book by its cover, Lupin.”

The silence that followed wasn’t the awkward kind this time. It was sharp, tense.

“Why’s that?” Lupin asked after a beat, voice quiet.

Regulus turned a page a little too roughly. “I think you’d know the workings of prejudice more than anyone.”

Another pause. They both knew what that meant.

“There’s a difference though,” Lupin said eventually, his voice still low. “Who I am… is not out of choice.”

And they both knew what *that* meant, too.

Regulus let out a breath that was almost a laugh. “Who says *I* have a

choice?"

He winced as the words left him. He'd peeled off the mask. Let down his guard. And with *Lupin*, of all people.

But to his surprise — and utter relief — Lupin didn't press. Didn't pry. He must have sensed Regulus's reluctance, because he just… paused, then turned his gaze to the book again.

"What's this one about, then?" he asked, carefully neutral. "I've read a lot of his work, but not this one."

Regulus stared down at the spine in his lap. His fingers ran over the embossed lettering like it might ground him.

He sighed. And somehow — Merlin knew why — he opened his mouth.

"So it's about Corolianus, a Roman general…"

*****

Regulus had had a lot of distractions. The match, the party. Punching Crabbe. A naked Isa. That weird encounter with Lupin.

But at some point, reality — cold, unyielding, inescapable — caught up.

And this reality was crawling closer, faster, more viciously than he could fathom. He could try and blame the alcohol or the lingering hangover, but it didn't take a genius to understand that it was far greater than that.

Because how did someone *get* this? How could Regulus *grasp* it?

How could he put it into words, how could he clarify in thoughts — that in just a few days, he was going to do the most dangerous, most terrifying, most consequential thing he had ever done?

And well — his life hadn't exactly been tea and biscuits until now, which, if anything, only underscored the sheer, paralysing terror of what lay ahead.

How could he make sense of the fact that everything he was experiencing now — could be *lasts*?

Was this the last time he'd hear Barty and Evan bantering across the

table, gleefully reenacting his punch to Crabbe's nose like a comedy sketch. The last time he'd hear Barty's laugh — guttural, unfiltered, roaring — echoing through the common room at something stupid Evan had said? Was this the last flash he'd see of Isa's golden hair? Was the memory of him towering over her, whispering in her ear how good she felt while moving inside her, the last moment he'd have alone with her?

Would those quick, stealthy glances at James in the Great Hall be the last he'd ever steal of the love of his life? Would this be the last time he'd see those twinkling eyes — brighter than the sun itself — or those hands — softer than any Chaser had the right to have — pushing back that eternal mess of hair?

And would this be the last time he'd see his brother?

The last time he caught that private, affectionate smile Sirius threw at his friends — the one that had once been his and his alone?

Sirius. His brother.

The boy who'd carved stars into the wooden panel of his bed frame as a reminder that he'd always be there. The boy who used to make him laugh so hard at the breakfast table that milk would come out of his nose.

The ache came suddenly. Brutally.

Saudade.

That familiar, hollowing longing. That grief for something still there but long gone.

It curled inside his chest like a hook. It sat behind his ribs, greedy and sharp. It closed around his throat.

Regulus could hardly breathe. Panic was climbing up his spine — slow but merciless, wrapping around his ribs and pressing, pressing, *pressing* until it took him over completely.

No. He couldn't do this.

It was then he decided not to wait until Tuesday morning. He had to leave now. He could not face that Potions class. He could not sit with the three most important people in his life at that table, knowing that it might be the last time he'd see them.

He could not bear it.

So, during dinner, while the Hall buzzed with careless noise and banter, he drew a slow, steadying breath. His gaze travelled slowly across the room.

First, to Barty and Evan across from him.

Barty, laughing — his usual smug grin stretched across his face. He always looked so unbothered, so untouchable, but Regulus knew better. Regulus knew what he carried. Regulus knew the pain he buried beneath the punchline. The hurt tucked safely under the sharp, brilliant banter.

And Evan.

The quiet opposite of his best friend. Who felt, for Regulus, more like family than a friend — which, of course, he technically, was. He had always admired Evan's heart. Big, steady, soft — not surprising, considering his parents were two of the most loving people Regulus had ever met.

Then further down the table — Miller.

She was talking with a friend, smiling in that slightly goofy way of hers. Miller. A bit like a little sister he'd never asked for but was suddenly terrified to lose. He had no idea how, but somehow, she had managed to carve out a space in his heart before he had even noticed it. Regulus had never been good at making real, genuine friends, at finding people he would kill for. But for Miller, he would.

His gaze slid, finally, to the Gryffindor table. To *them*.

James and Sirius were laughing — Sirius tipping back in his chair, James twirling his wand idly in his fingers.

No.

He couldn't do this. He couldn't look at them. He could not handle the way his blood sang with grief and longing at the sight of them.

His heart burned.

He felt the sting behind his eyes and blinked it away, forced himself to breathe.

He looked up at the staff table and noted that Slughorn wasn't there.

He was likely in his office already, which was perfect.

He would go to him, tell him that Cissy had written, that things with Mother were worsening. Cissy would inform him officially later, so there was no harm in leaving a night early.

The time was perfect. He could skip Potions class, and miraculously so, his last glance at Isa, who hadn't yet joined dinner.

He turned to Evan and Barty and cleared his throat.

"I'm heading to the library," he said, voice still dry, rough. "See you later?"

They nodded, and Regulus stood.

He started to walk, head down. One foot in front of the other.

But then, in cruel, *cruel* twist of fate, she appeared.

Isa.

She entered the Great Hall with Amaryllis and Melania, deep in conversation, until her eyes snapped up.

They locked on him.

Regulus froze. His breath caught in his throat.

Her initially cold eyes widened, her expression morphing into surprise. Then into confusion. And then into something deeper. Concern — real, immediate concern.

She knew. She always knew.

She could read him like no one else.

The ache came again — sharp and searing this time. The thought struck him so suddenly it nearly knocked him off his feet. She'd be alone if he died. Without him, there'd be no one to protect her. Yes, she had Barty and Evan, but that wasn't the same. They didn't know her like he did. What would happen to her if he didn't make it back? Who would she be married off to?

His stomach twisted.

He shoved the feelings down, buried them deep, deep down.

Her eyes were still on him, brown and shining, rich and grave. She opened her mouth, then closed it again, as if the words dissolved on her tongue.

He looked at her one last time. His gaze lingered.

A silent goodbye in his eyes.

*****

“So, what is this place?”

Regulus looked around, taking in the living room with its wooden beams and alpine charm — thick woolen curtains, lace doilies and the scent of dried lavender and smoke still clinging to the walls. A porcelain cuckoo clock ticked faintly above the fireplace.

“Aah, this,” Yaxley drawled, flopping onto the sofa like he owned the place, “is the house of dear Mrs. Huber.” He gave the name a painfully butchered German twist, then flicked his wand to ignite the fire with a soft whoosh.

Outside snow continued falling in lazy spirals over the garden where Mr. Nott was busy etching wards into the cold February air.

Regulus raised an eyebrow. “And who exactly is Mrs. Huber?”

“Mrs. Huber,” Mr. Nott answered as he stepped back inside and shut the door behind him, boots dusted with snow, “is a Muggle. Fortuitously, she’s visiting her dear mother in France for the week.”

Regulus cleared his throat. “And… why are we visiting her house?”

Yaxley’s smirk deepened. “Because just a little further down the village,” he said, stretching his legs out luxuriously, “lives our star player.”

Regulus blinked.

“I mean, *you* are the star player eventually, of course,” he said, tapping his temple. “But the prison guard lives there.”

It clicked.

Regulus inhaled slowly. “We’re staying here? For the next few days?”

Mr. Nott nodded, already rummaging through an oak cupboard in the

corner, likely in search of some dusty bottle of liquor.

“We’re lucky he lives in a Muggle village,” he said without looking back. “Would’ve been more complicated if it were magical — even the smallest wizarding hamlet would have basic protection.”

Regulus frowned. “What? The man lives here, in a Muggle village, with no magical protections — at all?”

Yaxley gave a lazy nod. “Yes.”

Regulus blinked again. “But that’s… idiotic.”

Mr. Nott gave a one-shouldered shrug as he finally pulled out a dusty bottle of schnapps. “He’s just a prison guard,” he said simply. “Not exactly a glamorous position. Low pay, low profile. Not enough status to warrant any real security.”

“Which,” Yaxley added, holding up his glass eagerly, “makes our plan *deliciously* simple.”

Regulus watched as Mr. Nott poured three glasses of the harsh, Swiss liquor.

“Here,” Nott said, handing them out. “Something to warm your insides.”

For once, Regulus didn’t hesitate, but instead eagerly downed it in a single swallow. It burned like fire, but he welcomed it.

Liquid courage was the only courage he could find, after all.

“Sit,” Mr. Nott gestured as he conjured a low table between them. With a flick of his wand, he summoned two objects — a slender magical display that hovered in mid-air, reminding Regulus oddly of some flat, miniature version of a Muggle television, and a Pensieve with a swirling, silvery glow.

Mr. Nott turned to Regulus, his voice all business now. “We’ve bugged the house already — unobtrusively, of course. You’ll be surveilling him for the next three days on this display.” He pointedly held up the flat thing. “Watch everything. Study him. His voice. His gait. The rhythm of his speech. Mannerisms. Accent. Learn it until it feels like your own skin.”

Regulus nodded stiffly, face pale.

“And,” Mr. Nott continued, “while he’s at work, you’ll go into town — in disguise, of course. Blend in. Pose as a traveller. Strike up conversation where you can. Get used to the cadence of local speech. Practice your French. Your German. Whatever you can get your hands on.”

Regulus felt his throat turn dry. The idea of approaching strangers in a foreign language was far from appealing, but he shoved the discomfort down. It wasn’t like it mattered anymore.

His eyes flickered to the Pensieve. “And that?”

“All the information he has about the prison — we’ve pulled it from his memories,” Mr. Nott said, setting the Pensieve down with reverence. “Routine, guards, internal structure. Schedules. Checkpoints. Entry spells. He’s not a high-ranking officer, but what he *does* know — you’ll know. You’ll go through it all.”

Regulus’s gaze was fixed on the swirling silver strands within the bowl.

Four days. Four days until Saturday.

Yaxley clapped his hands together with a grin far too bright for the situation. “Well then,” he said cheerfully, “let’s get started.”

*****

He did as told.

For three days, he barely slept — filling every waking hour with watching the prison guard on the flickering display, striking up conversation with strangers in the pub of the nearest town, and diving into the man’s memories, scribbling down spells, routines, information too vital to forget.

He sat hunched on that lumpy floral couch in Mrs. Huber’s living room, eyes plastered onto the magical screen, learning the contours of another man’s life as if it were his own.

The guard’s name was Markus Wenger. Regulus learned that Markus woke every morning at seven sharp, drank strong black coffee sweetened with honey and ate a thick slice of Zopf with apricot jam. He learned that he had two daughters — Klara and Léonie — who he played ‘airplane’ with each morning before work. First Klara, then Léonie — always Léonie a little longer, to Klara’s obvious chagrin.

At exactly eight o'clock each morning, Markus Apparated from a hidden, snow-covered patch behind the garden shed — the same spot every time, no variation.

Regulus memorised the rhythm of his days: arrival at the prison by eight-thirty, a wand check at the first ward gate, magical identification at the second. Then a briefing in a cold stone hall followed by patrolling his wings of the prison.

By six each evening, Markus returned home — greeted with a plate of Rösti and sausage or lentil soup and rye bread, depending on the day. His wife, Elise, would kiss him softly on the cheek and Klara and Léonie would pelt him with questions. *"Papa, did you see any dragons today?"* or *"Did anyone try to escape?"*. He would always answer with patient, fantastical stories, never letting on how bleak his job really was.

Regulus missed nothing. He saw it all — unfiltered, unrelenting. No part of Markus Wenger's life remained private. Every small, domestic detail was projected onto the magical display, every intimacy stretched bare across Mrs. Huber's tidy living room for all of them to see. The only moments spared were when the unmistakable sounds of Markus making love to his wife echoed into the room. Fortunately, Mr. Nott had taken pity on Regulus and his utterly horrified expression at the sounds of creaking bed slats, soft Swiss murmurs and high moans. Even now, Regulus flushed at the memory — how disturbingly, violently red he'd turned while Yaxley cackled beside him, wholly unbothered, sipping schnapps like it was the best theatre he'd ever seen. The shame still made Regulus shudder.

Each afternoon, while Markus worked at the prison, Regulus would Apparate into the town of Martigny — a slightly larger city. He had told the patrons of the local pub that he was just passing through, staying a few nights, brushing up on his French and German while travelling.

He met Monsieur and Madame Collet, the elderly couple who ran the pub. He learned that they had three grown children, all married and scattered across Switzerland, and two shaggy dogs named Max and Chérie. He learned about their youth filled with ice skating on frozen lakes in winters long past, with fireworks in the vineyard during summer fêtes. He learned of the year the Rhône nearly flooded the whole valley.

And in just three days, he had learned everything — from the layering

spells that opened the first gate of the prison, to the precise pronunciation of ‘ü’ in Valaisan French, to the gossip about the baker’s suspiciously frequent visits to his widowed neighbour.

No detail escaped him. Not the way Markus laced his boots each morning, nor the sound of the kettle wheezing in the morning, nor the soft way he whispered goodbye when he kissed Elise's temple.

Three days.

And now, only one remained.

*****

He spent the last day at Grimmauld Place.

It wasn’t exactly where he’d have chosen to spend what was very likely the last day of his existence, but well, he didn’t really have a choice. Even if he had wanted to, he couldn’t go back to Hogwarts — it would’ve looked too suspicious, too obvious, to disappear for several days, get to Hogwarts and then conveniently leave just before what would undoubtedly become one of the biggest events to take place in the magical world.

Black Manor was out of the question too. He didn’t trust himself to be alone with his thoughts. In Mrs. Huber’s house, he’d always had someone around — Yaxley and Mr. Nott had been with him the entire time, and even Lucius and Mr. Rosier had dropped in regularly, bringing food and keeping them company.

He’d silently thanked Cissy for the fact that Bellatrix had never shown up. Regulus was certain she would’ve insisted on being involved — partly for the sheer joy of taunting him, but mostly to meddle in anything that might lead to her husband’s escape from Hohenhain. Her absence, then, was definitely a result of Cissy’s intervention — one for which Regulus was very grateful.

Besides not trusting himself to sit alone with his thoughts, he felt he couldn’t be too obvious about wanting to outrun his parents that last day. He’d been travelling back and forth to Grimmauld Place, and it’d be undoubtedly noted if he left for Black Manor for his final day.

Still, Grimmauld Place was a dreadful place to wait.

Father was at the Ministry, leaving only Kreacher and Mother for company. Regulus had always liked Kreacher and knew with certainty

that the feeling was mutual, but Kreacher wasn't much for conversation. And Mother… she spent most of her time locked away in the library or in her bedroom, which — ironically — made that Regulus in fact did spend most of that final day alone with his thoughts.

He tried to occupy himself — pacing the hallway, attempting to read, organising drawers in his bedroom, cleaning spots that were already clean. But nothing worked.

He kept glancing at the clock.

Tick.
Tick.
Tick.

Another second gone. Another second closer to Saturday morning.

Saturday morning. Eight o'clock.

It wouldn't be Markus Wenger Apparating into the prison that day.

It would be Regulus.

Tick.
Tick.
Tick.

Another second closer.
Another breath.
Another heartbeat.

Tick.
Tick.

And then, the morning came.

He barely slept. It was Cissy who woke him when it was still dark outside. She forced him to eat something, pushing a plate of toast and eggs into his hands that Regulus could barely stomach.

He didn't see Father or Mother during breakfast. He didn't know how he felt about that, but there was no time to untangle it — because suddenly, Mother was there.

He was standing in the kitchen, coat already on, hand tightening around his wand, ready to step outside and Apparate to Mrs. Huber's

house for the final preparations. Cissy was fussing over his collar, adjusting his scarf, clearly emotional, when Mother stepped inside.

Cissy stepped back, leaving Regulus to turn to Mother.

He looked at her. Her hair was pulled back tightly, she'd already changed into her immaculate black robes.

And then it struck him.

Struck him how *human* she looked.

She hadn't looked like that in years. Her eyes looked tired. There was something hollow in them. The last time Regulus had seen that look was after Sirius had left. When she'd sat at his bedside, holding his hand in both of hers. When she had cried into his palms, whispering, begging him not to leave her too. Not to leave like Sirius did.

His throat went dry. The sting behind his eyes rose unbidden.

She reached out and stroked his cheek — fingers soft, slow, gentle.

His eyes fluttered closed at the touch. So soft. So gentle. It had been so long. So rare. That kind of touch from her — like he was something precious. Something loved. How he had craved that touch his entire life. How he had starved for it. How he had spent his whole life rationing what little of it he'd ever been given.

When he opened his eyes, hers were still on him.

She gave a small, almost imperceptible nod.

"Make me proud, Regulus."

Chapter End Notes

> God. Reg's giving me whiplash, going from banter with his friends to breaking into a Swiss prison. Poor lad.
>
> Next chapter... the prison break. I am aiming for sometime Monday but I really can't promise, life's sooo busy.
>
> Let me know what you think! Your thoughts/comments/kudos make my day (week, actually).

Chapter 19: Of Breaks & Hands

Chapter Notes

> As promised, another chapter on Monday. Here we gooooo - Hohenhain!
>
> Thank you so much, all of you, for your comments, praise and kudos. It means the world to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“No — no — don’t!”

“Avada Kedavra!”

Two words. A flash of green.

And the last thing Regulus registered was his body hitting the ground.

*****

Dying was painful.

Regulus had spent a good portion of his life contemplating what death might feel like. Especially compared to his friends and peers, he’d philosophised about the notion far more than was normal.

He’d been in many — far too many, considering his age — potentially lethal situations. He had witnessed death up close, had witnessed it intimately. He had seen people die with his own eyes. He had killed people with his own hands.

He had seen death.

And now, he *felt* it.

He had always assumed it would be painless. Peaceful, even. Just a deep, dreamless sleep stretching into eternity, stretching beyond time and form, beyond what the human mind could comprehend.

He’d reasoned — logically — that the nature of one’s death would, of course, affect the experience.

A Killing Curse, for instance, was supposedly instantaneous. Painless. Just… a heart ceasing to beat. A blade to the chest, though —

especially *a slow one*, piercing lung or liver, leaving the body gasping and the mind drowning in blood — that would be painful.

So yes — the dying might hurt. But the state of being dead? That, Regulus had always believed, would be gentle. Painless, peaceful.

But he was wrong.

It was not gentle. It was not painless. It was not peaceful in the slightest.

It was agony.

A searing, suffocating agony that ignited every nerve as his soul was ripped from his body. No gentle drift, no warm light, no quiet hush.

Only fire — white-hot, all-consuming — and pain.

There would be no rest in peace. Not for him.

*****

For what was considered one of the most secure prisons in the wizarding world, their plan to break into it was… surprisingly simple.

Rodolphus and Mr. Carrow would create chaos in Wing A, triggering a full transfer of inmates to Wing C. By the time the captives were all gathered, Mr. Nott would have disabled the anti-Apparition wards — and then, well… they would simply Apparate out.

Simple, at first glance.

But once one looked closer, it got a bit more complicated.

It would begin with Regulus Apparating into the prison at 8:30 sharp — just like Wenger did every morning. His wand would be checked and he'd give the password to enter. Then he'd collect a cup of coffee and proceed to the morning briefing. After sitting through fifteen minutes of protocol and dull updates, he'd excuse himself to use the toilet — the one closest to Wing A. There, he'd exchange a few words with the stationed guard — Frieda Keller — and discreetly leave behind the fireworks. They'd be enough to cause disruption, but not so much as to immediately alert the Aurors.

The fireworks would go off at exactly 9:30, set off by Mr. Carrow and Rodolphus. It would take no more than ten minutes for the transfer to

Wing C to begin. Which meant that by 9:45 — with a small buffer of five minutes just in case — Mr. Nott needed to have the wards lifted.

He would Apparate in with Bellatrix, Travers, Yaxley and Dolohov — all in disguise. The group was small enough not to alarm the Swiss Ministry outright, but large enough to provide backup from within. And since there was always the risk of a new ward being raised mid-operation, Mr. Nott's presence inside was critical — because bringing them down was easier from the inside.

And then… they would just Apparate out. But not before Regulus told them all that the wards were lifted, initiating a mass escape. They couldn't raise suspicion about the spy's allegiance, after all.

A rather simple plan on paper — especially for Hohenhain. Yet… just the tiniest hiccup, the smallest stroke of bad luck… and everything would fall to ruin.

It was then not surprising that it did. That didn't mean the event didn't have some other surprising things in store, though.

*****

Never in his life had Regulus imagined that his likely final living — or free — moments would be spent in the floral-chintz living room of Mrs. Huber's countryside cottage, nor that the last faces he'd see would be those of Mr. Nott, Lucius, Yaxley, Travers, Dolohov… and Bellatrix.

He couldn't quite pinpoint why, couldn't fully explain it, but somehow it felt unreasonably cruel that the last woman he laid eyes on was her.

They stood across from him like a strange farewell committee. Regulus on one side, tense, wired, already a little hollowed out. The six of them lined up opposite him — unreadable, serious, taut.

"You want to go over the plan one last time?" Yaxley offered, casually.

Regulus shook his head. "No."

He'd gone over the plan so many times he could probably recite it backwards in Ancient Runes. It was burned into his muscle memory, etched into his breath and bone. No — there was no need.

His eyes flicked to the grandfather clock in the corner. Time was

nearing.

“It’s time,” Mr. Nott said uncharacteristically gently. “For the potion.”

Regulus took the flask, its contents thick and murky. He didn’t hesitate — just threw it back. It tasted like metal and mildew.

The transformation came quickly — bones shifting, skin stretching, the familiar numb itch of becoming someone else. He could feel his features molding into Wenger’s.

Yaxley snorted. “Still looking fit, Black.”

Regulus didn’t respond. He barely even heard it. His pulse was loud in his ears, each beat echoing like the ticking of the clock behind him, counting down.

Mr. Nott must’ve noticed, because he touched Regulus’s elbow lightly and motioned for him to follow.

They stepped into the kitchen. Mr. Nott handed him another vial — this one small, clear and glowing faintly blue. Regulus recognised it as a calming draught.

He nodded his thanks and drank it.

“In two hours, we’ll be done,” Mr. Nott said.

Regulus felt nauseous instantly. It was probably meant as an assurance, to calm him down, but it did nothing to settle the nausea rising in his gut. The time frame only made it worse.

Two hours.

Two hours in which the rest of his life would be decided for him.

Dead. Captured. Alive.

He looked at Mr. Nott, voice barely above a whisper. “If… if I don’t make it—”

Nott stilled.

“Will you tell her?” Regulus asked, breath catching. “Tell her how much she meant to me?”

A very brief pause followed. Then, understanding lit behind Mr. Nott’s

eyes.

Isa.

Something flickered in his eyes, something that made Regulus catch his breath. Something sacred. For a split second, Regulus saw her — saw Isa's eyes in her father's.

Mr. Nott nodded.

The moment was suddenly broken by Lucius walking in the room.

"It's time, Regulus." he urged. "Let's go. I'll Apparate along behind the shed."

Regulus nodded. One last look — at all of them, lined up like grim spectres. No words exchanged, but the tension in the air was palpable. It made him sick.

Then he and Lucius Disapparated.

They landed behind the shed quietly. There was the sound of early morning birds, a faint breeze brushing the frost from the grass.

Lucius checked his watch. "Five minutes."

They waited.

Four minutes.

Lucius said something encouraging. Regulus didn't hear it — not really. His heart was pounding, his throat dry, his palms slick with sweat. He couldn't speak. He just nodded.

Three minutes.

Lucius offered something else — another comfort. Regulus nodded again.

Two minutes.

"Think about the target, Regulus," Lucius said, voice low and firm. "We have very precise instructions."

Regulus arched a brow, but said nothing.

One minute.

“If you have to give up Cletus and Rodolphus to get her out,” Lucius said, “you will.”

Regulus’s stomach churned. He turned sharply to look at him, alarm flaring hot in his chest.

Did Bellatrix know?

Did she know that her husband was… disposable? That if it came down to him or a spy Regulus barely knew — whose name he didn’t even know — he’d been instructed to leave Rodolphus behind?

There was no time to ask, no time to argue.

Because just then, the garden gate creaked open. Wenger — the real Wenger — stepped into the clearing.

Lucius looked at Regulus one last time.

“Good luck.”

*****

It all started out rather smoothly.

With the Calming Draught still dulling most of his nerves, Regulus managed to sip his — frankly disgusting — black coffee in the debriefing room without completely falling apart. His palms were still clammy, his heart still thundered with every beat, but he was functioning. He wasn’t paralysed.

It was a good thing Markus Wenger wasn’t exactly a social butterfly. Regulus managed to get through the time before his secret firework drop-off with minimal interactions, only greeting a few colleagues with brief hellos, carefully mimicking the Swiss-German accent.

By the time he reached Wing A, he was met by Guard Frieda Keller — a large woman with grey hair — who gave him a distracted nod as he offered a generic ‘fog’s lifting quicker than yesterday’.

It was quick and unmemorable, but gave him just enough time to discreetly slip the fireworks into the crevice behind the storage panel near the secondary supply hatch — a spot detailed in the blueprints Yaxley had acquired — without drawing attention to himself or his potentially slipping accent.

Then, right on schedule at 9:30, the commotion began.

Cracks and bursts of coloured sparks exploded through Wing A, rattling the metal pipes and jolting the guards into alarm.

“Wie zur Hölle sind sie an Feuerwerk gekommen?” someone barked. *How in God’s name did they get their hands on fireworks?*

“Keine Ahnung,” Regulus replied, tight-lipped. *No idea.*

Moments later, the guards were scrambling to evacuate the prisoners. Regulus, as planned, joined the escort. The prisoners were marched through the corridor in pairs — chains clinking, boots scuffing against the stone. Most looked pale and half-starved, clad in the regulation ash-grey robes of Hohenhain. A few glared, most just stared ahead, numb with routine. There were no Dementors in the hallways, but Regulus knew that the prisoners were subjected to the soul-sucking creatures in the private parts of their cells.

Among the prisoners were Mr. Carrow and Rodolphus. Regulus gave the faintest nod, barely more than a twitch, and definitely missed by everyone but them.

Mr. Carrow looked older, more worn-down than Regulus remembered. Rodolphus… his hair had grown out, and his face was sharper, thinner. Hollowed.

Finally, they arrived at Wing C.

And that’s when Regulus saw her. The target.

“She will wear her hair in a ponytail. Red hair tie.”

Regulus looked at her briefly.

There she was, standing just behind the second row. Somewhere in her fifties, blonde-ish hair pulled back tight, red tie holding it in place. Pale skin. Blue eyes. So very… *normal*. There was nothing particularly remarkable about her — no striking features, no aura of danger or something similar. She looked like someone’s aunt. Like a school teacher or a librarian.

And yet — yet… she looked *familiar*.

Regulus’s brain went into overdrive immediately, trying to find out why an anonymous prisoner in Hohenhain looked familiar.

It made absolutely no sense. He’d never seen a photo. He’d never seen

her. And yet something about her face tickled at his memory like a name just on the tip of his tongue.

There was no time to dwell on anything, though, as the clock was clearly ticking.

Around them, the transferred prisoners began murmuring, confused. A few whispered questions — others just watched the guards with narrowed eyes.

“What’s going on?”

“Why are we being moved?”

Senior guards barked orders. “Wing A is being investigated. This is temporary. You’ll be back in your cells shortly.”

Regulus checked the time.

9:40.

Five minutes.

His heart quickened.

Four minutes.

Was it really going to be this simple?

Three minutes.

A few hairs from a tortured, obliviated guard — was that really all it took?

Two minutes.

The calming draught was wearing off. He could feel the sweat gathering again, cold under his collar.

One minute.

He scanned the crowd — Mr. Carrow. Rodolphus. The woman with the red hair tie. The target.

Showtime.

In an instant, five figures Apparated into the ward, cloaked in

disillusionment and surrounded by ward-disrupting spells. Regulus didn't recognise their faces, but he knew who they were — Mr. Nott, Yaxley, Travers, Dolohov and Bellatrix. All ready to Apparate out the moment the target was secured, providing cover if things went sideways.

Panic erupted on impact.

Prisoners screamed, guards shouted — wands were drawn in a clatter of panic.

Regulus, impressing himself, didn't flinch. He kept his eyes on Rodolphus, Mr. Carrow and the woman with the red hair tie. A small, nearly imperceptible nod.

It was time to Apparate. Time to get out.

He closed his eyes and focused—

A jolt. Like slamming into an invisible wall.

He tried again.

Same recoil. Same impenetrable barrier.

He opened his eyes, breath tight in his chest.

No one had moved. Everyone was still there — frozen in place.

They couldn't Apparate.

Shit. Shit. *Shit.*

There was another ward.

It was the only explanation. It wasn't unexpected, shouldn't surprise them — they had prepared for this exact scenario, after all. That was the reason the others had come along. That was why Mr. Nott was here.

Still, knowing it didn't make it easier to breathe.

"*Fuck*."

Right on cue, chaos exploded around them. Guards shouting in at least three different languages, yelling over each other about prisoners, spells, protocols. The inmates scattered — ducking, diving, grabbing

at anything they could.

Regulus held back. He couldn't fight — not yet. Not unless it became absolutely necessary. His cover was still their best shot — a guard on their side, still unnoticed. If things truly went to hell, they'd need that more than any wand.

A curse hissed past his head, close enough to sear heat across his temple. He ducked on instinct.

"Need time."

The voice, low and calm, whispered right in his ear. Regulus jolted. Mr. Nott — barely visible under the shimmer of a Disillusionment Charm.

"There's another ward," he hissed. "I'll get it down. But I need time. Buy me time."

Regulus gave a single nod. It was all he could manage — his throat was too dry to speak, his chest too tight to move. There was no bloody time to think, no time to plan how to fight without blowing his cover, because that was when the Aurors arrived.

They Apparated into the ward in bursts of crackling noise and light, shouting commands in French, German — and, to Regulus's surprise — English.

Everything blurred.

They were severely outnumbered.

They were trapped.

And unless Mr. Nott got that ward down, they weren't getting out. They were properly fucked.

Time. They just needed time.

But what did time cost? How many would die for each passing second? What was the exchange rate — blood for seconds, seconds for lives?

Spells in every shade and form blasted through the room, lighting the walls and charring the stone. Everyone screamed. Prisoners screamed, confused or frenzied. Guards shouted, startled and flailing. Aurors

yelled, focused and furious.

A blast hit the ground near Regulus. He didn't think — he moved.

He raised his wand and fired — not at the attackers, but just past them. A near miss, just enough to sell it. The guard flinched — Travers took the opening. A green flash. The guard went down, clutching his leg, collapsing behind a shattered bench.

Nearby, a prisoner tackled an Auror to the floor, fists swinging. Two others wrestled a guard into the stone, knuckles red and slick with blood.

Off to the side, Mr. Carrow and Rodolphus had joined the fight, their wands supplied by Yaxley. They were able to take their opponents by surprise — within seconds, two Aurors and a guard lay unmoving at their feet.

Another inmate had nicked a wand off a downed guard and tossed it to someone behind him — and then again, and again — spreading stolen wands like contraband. Suddenly, inmates were armed, shouting spells wildly.

And well, where it had been chaotic from the start — it now was proper anarchy.

Inmates fired curses at guards while guards rallied with the Aurors. Regulus ducked between flying hexes, jinxing a prisoner here, a guard there — always careful. A Confundus Charm to slow down an Auror. A Jelly-Legs Jinx flung behind him when no one was looking.

There was noise everywhere — the screaming, the shouting, an exploding wall, the deafening sounds of alarms blaring to life and reverberating through the entire prison. Stone cracked. Glass shattered.

"Dementors will be here soon!" Yaxley shouted somewhere near the centre. "We'd better get out of here soon!"

Regulus didn't wait. He bolted into a side hallway, chasing a blur — Dolohov, he thought — who in turn was chasing a retreating guard.

The corridor narrowed.

Two prisoners locked in a fistfight crashed into the walls, gasping and bleeding. The alarm wailed on, a shrieking, metallic howl that set

Regulus's teeth on edge.

Then, a whisper in his ear — ragged and raw, almost lost in the noise:

"Just a bit longer, Regulus. I have it. I *know* I have it. Just a matter of minutes—"

Mr. Nott.

Regulus didn't respond but instead focused on Dolohov who had nearly caught up with the guard. But in the distraction, in that split second he had listened to Mr. Nott, Dolohov somehow collided with the guard.

A flash of green. A scream.

And suddenly—

Dolohov dropped.

Regulus froze. His stomach flipped. His heart stopped.

Dead. *Dead.*

Dolohov was dead.

Antonin Dolohov — only two years his senior, his fellow student at Hogwarts until just last year. The bloke he'd detested for so long but had actually started to warm up to. And now here he was — stiff, unmoving, dead on the floor, his eyes — wide in panic — already empty of life.

Panic clawed at Regulus again.

But there was no time to linger. Using his disguise to its full advantage and avoiding a duel with the guard who'd just killed Dolohov, Regulus spun and ran back toward Wing C.

The sight that greeted him there was worse than before.

Bellatrix, wild-eyed, was dueling three guards at once — and winning.

Yaxley was drenched in blood, his arm hanging uselessly by his side, but still holding his ground against both an Auror and a guard.

Regulus lifted his wand and fired — the Auror dropped, clutching his chest. Yaxley didn't hesitate. He killed the Auror instantly, then the

guard, and met Regulus's eyes for the briefest second.

It wouldn't be enough.

Nothing would be enough.

Mr. Nott was taking too long.

They'd miscalculated — they had miscalculated badly.

They hadn't expected this many Aurors. A few, maybe — perhaps a backup team if things escalated. But *this* ? They'd sent *troops* . Full squads. An instant response.

A flash — Regulus staggered as a hex slammed into the wall beside him.

It took him a second to locate the source: a prisoner.

He turned and engaged immediately. The duel was short — Regulus had the advantage of using his own wand, of not having been locked up and magically drained for Merlin knew how long.

It didn't last two minutes before Regulus killed him.

There was no time to dwell on the fact that he had just killed someone. Before he could move, another shout cut through the noise —

Mr. Carrow, locked in a savage back-and-forth with an Auror.

And then, another Auror joined the fight.

Regulus turned. That was it. There was no more waiting. They were going to fucking die. He'd either be killed now or later, when the Polyjuice wore off.

He lifted his wand and fired a hex.

The second Auror turned, face illuminated by the glow of Mr. Carrow's next spell.

Regulus stopped cold.

Black, silky hair.

Green eyes.

Professor Valaine.

Fuck.

Fuck.

What the hell was Professor Valaine doing here?

Was she an Auror?

Was she a *Swiss* Auror?

What the actual fuck?

But again — no time to dwell. Both Aurors had clearly clocked that Regulus wasn't on their side.

Mr. Carrow was locked in a vicious duel with Valaine now, their spells clashing mid-air, all bursts of light and heat.

Regulus turned to the second Auror, firing off a rapid barrage of hexes. The Auror was skilled — parrying quickly, forcing Regulus to duck and roll. A flash of green streaked past his shoulder — *close* — and then a crimson curse caught the Auror square in the chest. Not from Regulus or from Mr. Carrow — but a stray spell.

The Auror staggered, then stiffened and dropped.

Now it was just him and Mr. Carrow, facing Professor Valaine.

She fought with her wand in her left hand — which was strange, because most duellists favoured their right. And then, Regulus remembered.

Wandless magic.

How often had she seen her use her hand instead of her wand performing spells in class?

He didn't want to kill her. Didn't want to be the one who killed *two* of his Defence teachers.

But he didn't want to die, either.

Without thinking — without even realising the full weight of what he was doing — he did the only thing he could. He hit her with a slicing curse, sharp and aimed *exactly* where it needed to land: her wrist.

Her hand hit the floor.

Valaine staggered back, clutching the stump of her arm, shouting in agony. Her eyes locked on his — her face twisted in pain, confusion, and something else.

Recognition.

Regulus's stomach sank. He knew, in that instant, he'd made a mistake. That cut — that spell — it had given too much away. It had given away that he knew about her wandless magic.

And now, his cover as a prison guard wasn't the only one at risk.

They couldn't find out that he — Regulus Black — had been here. In Hohenhain. Impersonating a guard. Fighting as a Death Eater.

It was just a brief moment — just a split second — where Valaine looked at him, but it felt like she had him pinned there, frozen under her gaze for an eternity.

And then—

A flash. Another Auror entered the fight.

Mr. Carrow cried out, hit full in the chest by a spell that sent him crashing to the floor. Regulus didn't have time to look. Didn't have time to think.

It was just him now.

Him, an Auror, and Professor Valaine.

He raised his wand. He knew this was it. He was going to die. But he was going to die fucking fighting.

Across from him, the Auror lifted his wand too—

And then Valaine's voice cut through the noise.

"No — no — don't!"

"Avada Kedavra!"

Two words. A flash of green.

And the last thing Regulus registered was his body hitting the ground.

*****

The agony continued.

A violent pumping, a relentless slicing. Barbed wire dragging slowly through his veins — not tearing him apart, but holding him together with pain. Something was sticking into his ribs, something was wrong beneath his skin. There was no pain in waves — no ebb and flow, no coming and going with the tide, no rhythm to endure.

There was no relief between breaths. No high or low. Just a constant, unmoving, unchanging state of pain.

And then — light.

The tunnel? The one he'd read so much about in books — about transitions, about passage? Was this the corridor to peace, to rest? Would it finally stop hurting on the other side?

He was wrong.

There was light, yes — but the pain didn't end. It dimmed, it muted itself to something almost tolerable. But it was still there, a dull scream behind his ribs.

And the light was growing. So bright he could make out shapes. Outlines. A figure—

He realised, suddenly, he wasn't *moving* toward the light.

He was *seeing* it.

His eyes were open.

It took a long moment to place the room. Dark green walls. Carved crown moulding. High windows with thick velvet drapes drawn tight.

His bedroom. Grimmauld Place.

He wasn't dead.

Or — was *this* death?

His chest tightened.

Was *this* his final destination?

His last resting place… *here*?

No.

His fingers moved. He stared at them — thin, pale, trembling — but they moved.

He was *alive*. This wasn't a dream.

A strangled sound rasped out of his throat. It wasn't a cough, nor a groan, but something like clearing gravel. It was silent, barely audible, but enough to stir movement beside him.

Cissy.

Her blonde hair was messy, her eyes puffy and red. She looked exhausted. But as the realisation seemed to dawn on her that Regulus was awake, her expression morphed into utter relief.

She smiled, unsteady and tearful. It was so full of love it hurt his chest.

"I… I'm alive?" His voice was barely audible, more air than sound.

She nodded, already reaching for his hand, lifting it carefully into hers and pressing a kiss to his knuckles.

"Yes, Reg," she whispered, voice thick with emotion. "You're alive."

It was a sight he wouldn't forget for as long as he lived. There was so much love in her eyes — so much joy and relief — that for a moment, it overwhelmed him. He had never felt more loved by Cissy than he did in that moment.

He tried to move more than just his fingers, but his limbs were anchored to the mattress. His body was heavy. He was so, *so* tired. He was grateful the curtains were drawn — any light would've shattered him from the inside out.

"Don't move, Reg," Cissy said, her voice soft but firm as she leaned closer, one hand already fussing gently at the edge of his pillow. "Just lie still. Take it slow."

His eyelids fluttered. His throat felt like sandpaper, raw and burning, but he forced out: "What… happened?"

Cissy hesitated. "Don't think about that now—"

Regulus managed to shake his head at the dismissal. "*What happened*?" he asked, stronger, insistent.

Cissy sighed, easing back into the chair, her fingers still wrapped around his.

"We didn't expect that many Aurors — not immediately, at least. We knew there might be a new set of wards after Magnus took down the first, the ones that let us Apparate in… but we thought he'd be faster. We underestimated it."

He nodded slowly, barely able to process it. His thoughts crawled like molasses.

"You know it's top-level security," she went on. "The kind of wards that aren't meant to be broken from the outside. We're lucky that Hohenhain doesn't rely on much beyond wards, because they think they don't need to. There's probably only a handful of people in the world who can break the wards without knowing how they were cast. We're lucky to have Magnus."

Regulus nodded again, slower this time. This wasn't news — Mr. Nott was still the most skilled wizard Regulus had ever met.

His mind went back to the Wing, to Mr. Nott's whispers about needing more time.

"I… I thought I was dead," Regulus rasped.

"I thought so too," she admitted quietly. "For a bit."

"What… what happened?" he asked again.

"There was an explosion," she said. "Behind you. Magnus had just broken the final layer of the wards and Apparated you out. It — it saved your life."

He blinked, trying to absorb it.

He had *seen* the Killing Curse — it had been coming for him. And then the explosion — the blast had blocked it.

Impeccable timing.

He took a shallow breath, wincing. "Did we… did we succeed?"

She hesitated, just slightly.

Then nodded. “Yes. The target made it out. So did Rodolphus.”

“And… Mr. Carrow?”

Her expression crumpled. She looked down, her shoulders slumping. “Cletus didn’t make it.”

He winced. The Carrow twins’ father was dead. Then, suddenly, his thoughts lurched again. The corridor — Dolohov.

“Dolohov,” he whispered. “Antonin… he…”

Cissy nodded, her voice breaking. “Yes. He’s dead.”

Regulus shut his eyes. Antonin Dolohov — dead. The only bloke, aside from Rabastan, near his age. The only young one out of three. The only one who had remotely understood Regulus’s role in the early phases of the Revolution. The only one with Rabastan just as new, young and inexperienced as Regulus.

And now — gone. Dead.

“And the rest?” Regulus managed.

She exhaled. “Everyone else got out. Not without injuries. You and Corban were the worst. He woke up yesterday — he’s expected to recover fully.”

Regulus frowned. “What — what day is it?”

Her hand smoothed his hair back gently. “It’s Tuesday evening, Reg.”

He jolted upright — or tried to. His body screamed in protest, letting him move only an inch or two before collapsing back down.

“I’ve been out for *three days*?”

“Almost four,” she said softly, guiding him back down. “You were in an induced coma. They stopped the potion this morning to see if you’d wake up on your own. And you did. They don’t think there’ll be any lasting damage, but they wanted to give your body the best chance to heal.”

He glanced at the bandage around his wrist. There was a dull ache everywhere — his whole body felt like it was wrapped in pain. He didn’t have the strength to lift the sheets and check.

His eyelids drooped. His body had never felt heavier.

“I’ll go Floo the Healer,” Cissy whispered, standing carefully.

He didn’t manage to nod.

He was already asleep before the door closed behind her.

*****

Never in his life had Regulus dreaded returning to Hogwarts this much.

The place that had always felt like freedom — freedom from his parents, from Grimmauld Place when he hadn’t yet become custodian of Black Manor — now, strangely so, loomed like a cage. The place where he could at least breathe shallowly — a place where his role in the Revolution still followed him but at least didn’t always have its fingers wrapped around his throat.

And yet he dreaded it.

Yes — a part of him, the tiniest part, looked forward to it. Looked forward to it because returning to Hogwarts made it real. Looked forward to it because walking those halls again would anchor him to the present. Would confirm he had survived. That he was still there — breathing, *alive* . That he was *free* .

Later, he would understand.

Later, he would understand that he hadn’t escaped a prison at all — only moved from one cell to another. Later he would understand that Grimmauld Place, Hohenhain, Hogwarts… they were all just different walls of the same sentence. Later, he would understand that the bars had always been his parents, that the walls had always been his path, and that his life had always been patrolled by Dementors, draining all joy, all choice until nothing remained but duty.

Later, he would understand he had been born a prisoner — and was destined to die one. From cradle to grave.

But not yet.

But that particular Wednesday evening, just before dinner, as he stepped through the green flames of Slughorn’s fireplace, he didn’t know that, and instead felt relieved — felt like he had avoided

imprisonment altogether.

He had broken into one of the most secure magical prisons in the world — and lived. The scale of it was almost too immense to comprehend.

And yet… even that miracle, even the knowledge that he had done the impossible,couldn't silence the dread clawing at him as he returned to Hogwarts.

He couldn't stay at Grimmauld Place any longer. They had kept up the pretense — that his mother was ill — but even that excuse had limits. Plenty of other students had ill parents, and they still attended classes. Regulus tried not to think of Barty's mum, locked up in some psychiatric ward in Germany.

Regulus had been gone for ten days. And now, although his entire body protested, he had to return.

His hand was still bandaged. He had contemplated wearing gloves to hide it, but he felt it would only draw more attention, make people more suspicious. So he settled on the story of a potion mishap, cutting himself with a knife.

His back was still blotched with bruises — deep, painful purple — and there was a limp in his right foot he tried desperately to mask. The headache hadn't lifted, either, despite all the potions he'd taken. It sat behind his eyes like pressure on the skull, pulsing with every heartbeat.

But he had to fake it.

He had to feign normalcy.

They couldn't know where he had been. Couldn't know he had played a central role in what the world now called the *Hohenhain Breach* .

From Britain to the furthest magical outposts in Polynesia, it was the only thing anyone talked about. One of the most secure prisons in the world, and there had been a massive breakout — on a Saturday morning, in broad daylight.

The Swiss authorities were under such intense scrutiny they'd even released a full report — or what they thought had happened.

Twenty-five casualties.

Two Death Eaters.

Six Aurors.

Five guards.

Twelve prisoners.

The two bodies bearing the Dark Mark had been burned beyond recognition — the only identifying feature the faint traces of the skull and serpent inked into what was left of their arms.

The names of the Aurors weren't made public — a matter of national security.

But they had published the names of the guards.

And at the bottom of the list was Markus Wenger.

Lucius had killed him after the operation was complete — tying off loose ends. The Swiss authorities would never know that the entire breach began with him — with Markus Wenger.

Husband of Elise. Father to Klara and Léonie.

Now nothing more than ash on the wind.

*****

His heart was pounding in his throat by the time he reached the doors of the Great Hall. It wasn't beating, it was *slamming* — like it was trying to break out of his ribcage.

He wiped his bandage-free hand against the inside of his robes. He felt the sweat pooling at the base of his neck.

He tried to rationalise. It was just dinner. Just dinner in the Great Hall of Hogwarts. He'd broken into Hohenhain. He'd broken into the most fortified prison in the wizarding world, fought Aurors and got out alive. Surely he could walk into the bloody Great Hall and sit down to eat without falling apart.

He inhaled — deep, slow — and then entered.

The noise hit him like a wave — the clatter of cutlery, the hum of voices bouncing from the enchanted ceiling to the stone walls.

Regulus walked straight, chin high and a bit unbothered, like someone with nothing to hide. And yet, all he wanted was to disappear. To blend in. To get to the Slytherin table unnoticed.

He didn't turn but he felt it instantly — the gaze from the Gryffindor table was like heat on his skin. He felt it born through him, two pairs of eyes in particular. Sirius and James.

He didn't look.

The moment his feet crossed into the Slytherin aisle, the conversation at that end of the table dropped.

Evan and Barty were seated across from Isa, and Regulus was glad his other friends weren't there. Barty's eyes grew wide at the sight of Regulus before he managed to compose himself. Evan's face had been more controlled, but his eyes remained dark with unspoken questions.

And then there was Isa.

Her eyes locked with his, and it was like a blow to the chest.

She didn't speak. But her breath caught — a tiny, audible hitch — and her eyes welled up instantly.

She'd known, of course. Known that he hadn't been off to an ill Mother. And she'd definitely been worried sick when Regulus had taken off without a goodbye ten days ago. Surely she had pieced it together once the Breaking News edition of the Prophet had arrived that Saturday, mentioning the Hohenhain Breach. Surely she'd known immediately where he'd been. With what he'd been involved in.

And to read in the paper that there had been two Death Eaters dead, unrecognisable…

Regulus was sure that she'd corresponded with Cissy in some way — she was too stubborn not too, so she had surely known that he was alive before now, but it did nothing to diminish the raw emotions literally radiating off her at that table. But he couldn't have that now. He couldn't have a mental breakdown by Isadora Nott at the arrival of Regulus Black in front of the entire school.

So he slid into the bench beside her, his joints screaming in protest, and leaned close. His voice was low, hoarse, barely audible over the noise:

“Later, Ies. Don’t make a scene.”

Isa inhaled sharply. Nodded once. Her jaw clenched, but she said nothing.

The silence at the table stretched tight, the air between them all tense enough to snap. Regulus was almost grateful when Barty broke it — even if it was with a stupid joke.

“Ah, shit, Evan,” Barty muttered, rolling his eyes dramatically, “Now that Black’s back, you’ll have to go back to pretending you don’t miss him.”

Evan snorted. “He’s not that charming.” But his voice was too even, and his eyes never stopped flicking over Regulus — assessing, dissecting, as if he was trying to piece something together.

Regulus forced a laugh. Then sighed, grabbed a spoon with his good hand, and began piling roast potatoes and parsnips onto his plate. He wasn’t hungry. He wasn’t anything. Just going through the motions.

He took a sip of pumpkin juice. Then looked up —

And froze.

Professor Valaine.

Across the Hall. Watching him.

Not watching him — stripping him completely bare with a single gaze. Peeling away every lie, every mask.

Her green eyes locked onto him like a spell.

Regulus forced himself not to look away too quickly, nor to stare for too long. He didn’t let his gaze drop to her hand. The hand that he had sliced off, but that had already been regrown.

He blinked and turned back to his food.

He was positive.

She knew.

She knew it had been him.

But how? How did she know?

His mind reeled backward — back to the fight, back to chaos and alarms and screaming. Back to the moment he had turned his wand on her. And the look in her eyes, agony and pain, but something more—

A realisation slammed into him.

“No — no — don’t!”

Had she said it?

Had she *really* tried to stop him? To stop the Auror?

Regulus couldn’t trust his memory. Not in the fog, not with the adrenaline in that moment. But it had *felt* real. It had felt like she had tried to spare him.

She had tried to save him.

Save the boy who had just sliced off her hand.

Why?

Chapter End Notes

> And Reg lives, YES. I always have a harder time writing action scenes, so I hope it doesn't show. Somehow angsty, internal thoughts (+crises) and dialogue are so much easier to write. I hope I've done it justice.
>
> Next chapter will be out somewhere this weekend. We'll see more of people's reactions, we'll have another Potions class, too ;)
>
> Let me know what you think! Can't believe it's only 9 chapters and we'll get to the end of this book, and so much is going to happen still. So excited!

Chapter 20: Of Run-Ins & Conversations

Chapter Notes

> Alright, new chapter!
> I'm travelling for the week last minute and didn't take my laptop with me (now posting from my phone at the gate, praying the formatting isn't going to screw me omg).
> I didn't take my laptop with me and although my best prose is often written in my iphone notes, I won't be able to properly write/self-beta etc. On top of that I'll be topping off the week with having to drive 2000 miles crossing 12 countries (in two days) so I might need 10-15 business days to recover from that.
>
> So I can't really promise anything regarding the schedule but I will upload asap.
>
> As always, lots of love ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Miraculously, Regulus had managed to avoid a confrontation during dinner. Not that he'd left it to chance, though; he'd simply risen from his seat without warning, announced that he was returning to the dorm and all but legged it down to the dungeons. He'd moved too quickly to be followed. Sirius and James had both stood up the moment he'd moved — Regulus had seen it from the corner of his eye — but he'd been faster.

He wasn't naïve. He knew vanishing from Hogwarts for ten days would raise questions. He also knew that Sirius was almost paranoid about Regulus's likely allegiances and that though he might be obsessive, he wasn't wrong. Disappearing without a word while the Hohenhain Breach took place would definitely feed the fire of Sirius's suspicions — which, in all fairness, weren't even suspicions so much as accurate deductions, of course.

So Regulus was well aware he'd have to face his brother at some point, but for now, he was just relieved to have outpaced him. Still, whereas Sirius and James couldn't exactly storm into the Slytherin dungeons demanding answers, the same couldn't be said for Isa.

Once back in his room, Regulus had gone straight for the shower and thrown on his pyjamas, even though it was still early. He was

absolutely knackered. Every inch of his body ached, and his skull throbbed like it was trying to split itself open from within.

Once Barty and Evan had joined him they naturally resorted to asking all kinds of questions about his whereabouts and about the bandages wrapped around his hand, and Regulus offered a string of half-lies and vague excuses, none of which they seemed to buy, but none of which they dared to push. They knew, after all, that he was bound to secrecy. And they were desperate to join, so they'd bite down their curiosity and play along rather than risk falling out of favour with the Revolution.

Unsurprisingly, Barty had gone quiet with something like awe, while Evan had gone quiet with something closer to concern.

"You're alright, though, mate, yeah?" Evan asked as Regulus tucked a few books into his bag for the next day's classes.

Regulus tamped down the odd flicker of gratitude the question stirred and tried to shift the tone.

"Getting soft on me, Rosier?" he snorted.

Evan rolled his eyes with a tired sort of smile. Barty, naturally, jumped in to keep things light.

"Oh, please," he grinned. "Evan acts like he's all hard as nails, but you vanish for ten days and suddenly he can't concentrate on anything. Tragic, really."

Regulus snorted. "Don't worry. We're stuck with each other. You'll have plenty more chances to weep over me."

Barty gave a dramatic sniff, and Evan simply rolled his eyes again.

When Regulus finally climbed into bed, he felt a brief flicker of triumph — not only had he dodged Sirius and James, but, by some miracle, Isa as well.

That is, until the door banged open.

He barely had time to yank his curtains shut.

"He's already asleep?" Isa's voice sliced through the room. Though he couldn't see her, Regulus could hear the storm in her tone — unfortunately, the loudest note being anger.

Barty and Evan seemed to clock it as well; their hesitation was audible.

“Well,” Barty offered, “he’s got his curtains shut—”

“I don’t care,” Isa snapped, her footsteps closing in. “I’d like to speak to him. In private.”

This time, Evan tried to come to the rescue. “Look, I don’t know if that’s a good—”

“Out,” Isa said, voice sharp and unflinching.

It was sharp enough that Regulus sighed, then pulled his curtains open — evidently begrudging the entire affair. He didn’t look at her. Instead, he busied himself adjusting the curtain ties, then flicked his gaze towards Evan and Barty.

They hovered uncertainly. Regulus gave a brief nod — indicating it was okay.

“Alright,” Barty drawled as he slunk towards the door, “but do us a favour and close the curtains this time if you’re heading for make-up sex.”

Both Isa and Regulus shot him identical homicidal looks.

Evan was already trying to push Barty out the door.

“And a silencing charm, Nott!” Barty called over his shoulder. “A silencing charm!”

The door clicked shut behind them, and silence fell like a stone.

Regulus didn’t immediately look at her. He sat at the edge of his bed, head bowed slightly, mentally bracing himself — for her questions, her concerns, his own feelings that he had not even started to acknowledge, let alone process.

His head was full and his body was aching.

And then, the dam broke.

Isa stormed across the room and exploded.

She punched him in the arm. “You left!” she shouted. “You left for ten bloody days without a word!”

Another punch — harder this time. Regulus grit his teeth, the impact nearly knocking the wind out of him. Every bloody inch of his body hurt already and the blows only made it worse. He held himself steady though, because she was entitled to be furious.

He swallowed the pain — and the guilt rising thick in his throat. It *had* been a low blow, disappearing from Hogwarts like that, no warning, no note. But then again, he and Isa hadn't exactly been on speaking terms. It had been weeks of her trying to talk to him, him dodging her at every turn — and then somehow still ending up with her clothes on the floor, his mouth on hers, and his words suddenly working again the moment he was thrusting in her. They were the wrong kind of words though, only encouraging their crossing of boundaries rather than putting a stop to it. He knew it was a mess, but he just hadn't figured out how to fix it.

Isa wasn't finished.

"I've been worried sick, Reg. You were just— *gone*! I had to go to bloody Slughorn and ask if you'd gone home. Do you know how mad that is?"

Another punch. He flinched, hard this time.

"Don't ever fucking do that again," Isa snapped. Her voice cracked. "I *hate* you — I HATE you!"

She stopped, chest heaving. Regulus stayed still, body slightly hunched from the pain, still wincing.

And then — she froze.

Her eyes moved over him properly for the first time. Her voice dropped, concern evident in her eyes. "Are you — are you in pain?"

Regulus shook his head instinctively. "No. No, I'm fine."

But his face betrayed him.

"Stand up," she said.

"Ies, seriously. I'm okay—"

"*Stand up*, Regulus."

He sighed, resigned, and pushed himself to his feet. Her hands were already reaching out, hovering over his stomach. The moment her

fingertips brushed him, his breath hitched. Everything in him already hurt — and this was just his stomach. His back was going to be so much worse.

Isa lifted the hem of his shirt.

His stomach bore a few healing cuts and scratches. But when she stepped behind him and saw his back — bruised, battered — she gasped.

Her mouth opened. And of course, her tirade began. “You were *there*. You were actually there. For fuck’s sake, can’t they find a *grown adult* to throw into battle? Why do they have to send *you*—”

“Ies, don’t.” Regulus’s voice was quiet. He was so, so tired. “Not now. I just want to sleep. Please.”

Apparently that was enough to stop her. Her anger faltered. She was silent for a beat before opening her mouth again, her voice much gentler this time.

“What… what happened?”

“You know I can’t talk about it,” he said pointedly. “But I’m alright. Really.”

Isa exhaled, eyes glistening. For once, she didn’t press, didn’t push. Apparently the sight of him was so bad that it had even managed the need to feed her usually insatiable curiosity.

Regulus let out a long sigh and lay down, carefully, on his stomach.

After a moment, Isa gave him a small, wry smile. “Mind if I lie with you? Just for a bit?”

His mind short-circuited immediately. What did that mean? Lie with him, how? Where? How close? What did she want?

He was far too bloody tired for this.

Which — ironically — was precisely why they should never have slept together in the first place. It had complicated everything and Regulus had enough complicated in his life already. Their friendship had been one of the only things that made sense. It had always been one of the easiest, the most natural, solid things in his life. And they had cocked it up — cocked it up by sleeping together, by blurring every line that

had been there for a reason. They'd given meaning to things that shouldn't have meant anything… and stripped the meaning from things that once had.

Isa seemed to pick up on his inner turmoil and offered a small, wry smile. "I'll be completely decent, Reg. I'll just lie next to you. Above the sheets, even."

He gave a silent nod.

She climbed in beside him, careful not to touch his back, settling on her side. Her hand found his hair, fingers threading gently through the curls at the nape of his neck.

Regulus felt himself unwind almost instantly. He stayed on his stomach, head turned sideways so he could see her.

"I've missed you, Reg," she whispered.

He tried for a snort. "Barely survived ten days without me, Nott?"

Isa gave a huff of laughter — then sobered. "I've missed you long before that, Reg."

He swallowed, letting out a low sigh.

"I… we have to stop. That, Ies."

She didn't answer. Just kept her fingers in his hair, giving him space to say it all.

"I—" his voice faltered. "I need you, Ies."

Her eyes welled up again.

"I need my best friend."

She still said nothing, but the tears fell soundlessly now, tracking down her cheeks.

"It becomes too complicated," Regulus went on, quieter, his eyes locked on hers, "if we keep crossing those lines. And I can't lose you."

Isa stayed silent, her thumb brushing against the curl at his temple.

Regulus shifted slightly, his voice uncertain. He felt he owed her more — an explanation, some reassurance.

“It’s not that I didn’t…” he hesitated, forcing the words out. He knew he needed to say them, needed to clear the air, but that didn’t take away the fact that he felt utterly embarrassed by discussing this. “It’s not that I didn’t… enjoy it, Ies.”

Isa blushed, her eyes flicking down.

“You’re… amazing, Ies. But we can’t. Not anymore.”

She was quiet for a long moment before she responded.

“But doesn’t it mean something, Reg? That… it’s that good? I mean… we can’t really deny we have chemistry, right?”

Regulus gave a sad, knowing smile.

“Ies,” he said gently, “be completely honest with me now.”

She nodded, wiping her cheek.

“If Davies walked in this room right now… and you had the green light — no consequences, no rules… who would you kiss?”

Isa’s eyes fluttered shut.

That was enough of an answer.

“Exactly,” Regulus said, his voice gentle and calm.

Isa exhaled shakily. “You know they’ve talked about marrying me off to you for years now, right? It’s going to happen — probably sooner rather than later.”

Regulus nodded, throat dry.

He knew it. They both did. They’d never get to be with the people they truly loved. Isa would never have Davies. And Regulus… Regulus would never have James.

And they would be forced to morph their friendship of over a decade into something resembling romance.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “I know.”

Silence.

“But if we mess it up then, it’ll be on them. It’ll be their fault. If we

mess it up now… it's on us, Ies."

More silence.

Isa cried again, shifting closer, their faces now aligned — his face turned sideways on the pillow, hers curled towards him. They looked at each other. Isa's eyes were full of tears.

Regulus felt the lump in his throat rise, the sting building behind his eyes, but he blinked it back.

"All of it," Isa whispered, voice trembling. "The war… this… all of it's so unfair."

"I know," Regulus murmured, his lips barely moving. He reached an arm round her waist, light as a breath. "I know, Ies."

They stayed like that. Neither speaking, neither moving.

Isa's fingers kept stroking through his hair, and Regulus found himself tracing faint, aimless circles on her waist with his thumb. He breathed in slowly — the familiar scent of her hair, the comfort of her presence — and felt, for the first time in weeks, a strange sort of relief. He'd finally said it. Finally said what he should've said long ago.

Because everyone who meant something to him always left.

Mother and Father had left him before he was even born — very much alive and present, yes, but never really there, at least not for him. Sirius had left. And James was gone now too.

He couldn't risk losing her as well. Couldn't risk losing his best friend too.

He let out a quiet breath. Isa shifted closer, her hand still in his hair, and slowly, carefully, they fell asleep like that — tangled in grief and tenderness and promises of things he hoped they would be able to salvage.

*****

The scene in the dormitory with Isa had kicked off a strange series of run-ins that would define the rest of February.

Unsurprisingly, the conversation with Sirius and James was next on the list.

Regulus woke feeling like someone had hexed him repeatedly in his sleep — which, to be fair, wasn't far off. His entire body ached, limbs heavy and bruised, his neck stiff from sleeping on his stomach all night, head tilted awkwardly in Isa's direction. She'd fared better, unsurprisingly, considering she hadn't been duelling guards, prisoners and Aurors in Hohenhain, nor been caught in the blast radius of a collapsing stone wall.

By the time Regulus opened his eyes, the dormitory was already semi-awake. Crabbe had gone, Selwyn was halfway out the door, Evan was rifling through a chaotic pile of books, and Barty was — of course — strutting around in nothing but a pair of boxers.

Isa, stretching out her back with a low groan, squinted blearily at him. "Put some bloody clothes on, Crouch."

Barty smirked, utterly unbothered. "You forget we spent a month sharing a bed, Nott?"

Isa gave him a flat look and yawned. "Yes, and you put trousers on every time."

"Did I?" Barty said breezily, shrugging with far too much smugness.

Isa sighed, long and suffering, and pushed herself up with effort. She shot Regulus a small, private smile and padded out of the dorm.

Regulus rolled carefully onto his back with a groan, his muscles protesting the movement. Barty, now finally bothering with robes, gave him a smirk far too wicked for this early in the morning.

"Don't," Regulus muttered.

"I didn't say anything, Black."

"Keep it that way, Crouch."

Evan sniggered. Barty joined in.

Regulus managed to avoid Sirius and James for most of the day. It wasn't for lack of effort on their part, though. Regulus knew his brother and his persistence better than anyone — inherited from Mother, who also suffered from the total inability of letting anything go. Once decided something, they both pursued it to the edges of madness. Regulus knew. He'd lived with both of them, after all.

But having lived with both of them, Regulus had also become absurdly good at slipping away unnoticed when it suited him. He grabbed breakfast in the last fifteen minutes of the hour, stuffing toast and a boiled egg into a napkin and slipping out just before Sirius and James made it into the Hall. He arrived early for lunch, and left as soon as the Gryffindors began to trickle in. He ducked behind a suit of armour near the Charms corridor when he heard James's voice down the hall — and stood perfectly still, barely breathing, until the footsteps passed.

It was all very dignified.

Eventually, though, the luck ran out.

Just before dinner, as Regulus was about to step into the Great Hall — Isa beside him — he felt a pair of strong hands seize his arm.

Pain shot through his bicep, sharp and electric.

His wand was out in a flash — only to find himself face to face with Sirius. James, of course, stood beside him, looking both exhausted and faintly resigned.

Regulus yanked his arm back. "Let go of me!"

Sirius didn't. His voice was firm, eyes squeezed in thin lines. It was almost enough to cover up the concern tangled in his voice. "Where were you?"

"Padfoot," James muttered, "maybe just—"

Regulus knocked Sirius's hand away with force, anger flaring hot. "Don't touch me."

He stepped back from the Great Hall entrance, Isa and the others quickly following. He supposed it was a small mercy that they were at least spared the embarrassment of causing a scene in front of the entire school. James would do anything to avoid a full-blown fistfight between the Black brothers in the Entrance Hall — but really, there were only a handful of people who could stop Sirius once he'd set his mind to something, and Regulus sincerely doubted James was one of them.

Sirius's voice rose, sharp and loud, now stripped of any softness. "Where were you, Regulus?"

Regulus flattened his robes almost theatrically. He'd known this conversation would happen. He'd rehearsed it, even. Staying calm — unfazed — was key. Sirius couldn't be allowed to get under his skin.

"Calm down, *Walburga*," he said coolly. "Don't want to make a scene, do we?"

With Sirius loathing the fact he took so much after Mother, it was a low blow — and it landed exactly as intended. Regulus relished in the effect for a moment.

Sirius's face twisted. "Fuck you, Regulus."

"If you want a conversation," Regulus snapped, "perhaps don't start by ambushing me and digging your claws in, *brother*."

Isa stood still beside him, silent and alert. James looked equal parts worried, guilty, and grimly determined. Regulus's gaze flicked to him for just a second — James's lips parted slightly, eyes soft and unreadable — and something traitorous fluttered in Regulus's chest before he looked away.

Sirius wasn't finished. His voice dropped low — tight and dangerous. If Regulus hadn't grown up in House Black, he might've found it threatening.

"Where were you?"

Regulus exhaled, tired. "I was at Grimmauld Place. Mother was very ill."

Sirius's eyes dropped to the bandage around Regulus's hand, voice biting. "Oh? The disease contagious, by any chance?"

Regulus raised a brow. "Oh, are you worried for me, now, big brother?"

Sirius ignored the dig, jaw tight. "Such a coincidence, don't you think? You vanish from Hogwarts for more than a week and suddenly there's the largest prison break in modern wizarding history. Two Death Eaters freed — supposedly with British civilians involved. Massive international scandal."

Regulus didn't flinch. He raised an eyebrow, carefully holding his expression. He would not let Sirius get to him. He couldn't. "Last I heard, the Death Eaters died."

“*Heard?*” Sirius snapped. “From whom?”

Regulus rolled his eyes. “The *Daily Prophet*, idiot.”

“Where were you?”

Regulus gave a tired sigh. “Are you implying I had something to do with the Hohenhain breach, brother?”

“Oh, what gave it away?” Sirius said, eyes glinting with sarcasm.

Regulus suppressed the uneasy twist in his stomach. He didn’t look at Isa or James, doing his best to give his scoff just the right edge of disdain.

“You seriously believe that *I* — a sixteen-year-old Hogwarts student — had anything to do with the largest prison break in centuries?”

Sirius didn’t blink. He just stared. He was truly too clever for his own good, but Regulus wouldn’t waver.

Regulus rolled his eyes. “Come on, what could I possibly have added?”

“Prove it,” Sirius snapped.

Regulus blinked. “What?”

“*Prove it.*”

“How, exactly?”

“Show me your arm.”

Regulus’s stomach lurched. “You’re joking.”

“I’m serious.”

“Of course you are.” Regulus rolled his eyes and, with exaggerated patience, offered his right arm.

“Your *left* arm, Regulus.”

The pause was brief, but heavy. Isa’s shoulders stiffened beside him. James shifted, silent.

Regulus exhaled sharply through his nose. He shoved up the sleeve of the arm which, in fact, did bear the Mark, but which he had concealed

with the usual charm.

He held it up with flourish. “Happy now, *brother*?”

Sirius stared, eyes narrowed, clearly still unconvinced. James, beside him, looked like he wanted to defuse things, but didn’t know how.

“Come on, Padfoot,” James said, quiet but firm. “Let’s go.”

But Sirius wasn’t done. His expression shifted — from fury to something frighteningly raw.

“Leave them,” he blurted.

Silence. Everyone froze.

Regulus looked at him.

“Leave them, Reg. Before it’s too late. They’ll make you fight. You know that. One day, they’ll make you *kill*.”

He pointedly did not look Isa’s way.

Oh, if Sirius even knew… Knew that he’d been marked long ago. Knew of the things he had done, the people he had killed…

Knew that it was already far too late…

Regulus swallowed, then forced out a scoff. “Oh, and Dumbledore won’t? You think his little army’s just going to sit around braiding each other’s hair?”

There was a brief glance between Sirius and James — so brief that Regulus almost didn’t catch it. But it had been there, and it had been charged with something. It made Regulus’s stomach sink before he even fully understood why.

It didn’t take long.

The pang hit hard and fast — like a punch to the ribs. So it was true then. The battlefield had finally been laid out.

Regulus on one side. His brother and the love of his life on the other.

Regulus let out a humourless snort. “So you’re here lecturing me about potentially joining whatever while you two are already playing house with Dumbledore? Right. That’s rich.”

“I’ll fight on the right side,” Sirius shot, voice rising. “The right side of history, Reg.”

Regulus scoffed at his moralism, at the hypocrisy.

He’d seen and heard it before, of course. Killing mattered, but only when the traditionalists did it. When it was *them*, there was always excuses.

He had to go to the most insane lengths — had gone so far as having his own Mother be made sick — just to avoid being expelled for something the Headmaster himself was now doing in plain sight: recruiting children into a war.

“There’s no right or wrong side in history,” Regulus said at last, voice flat. “Just the winning side with the printing press.”

Sirius let out a sharp laugh — bitter, disbelieving. “You sound just like them.”

And with that, Sirius turned on his heel and strode into the Hall.

James hesitated, just for a second. His eyes caught Regulus’s — and there it was. That flicker of sadness, of knowing.

Regulus looked away first.

And then James followed Sirius inside.

*****

It wasn’t until Potions class the following week that Regulus found himself in the same room as Sirius and James again.

Thankfully, Sirius had gone back to ignoring him entirely — not a glance in his direction, and filling the silences with stupid chatter aimed mostly at Evans and Amaryllis. It was obvious he was trying to fill the space with his talking to diminish the chances to hear Regulus talk. Not that Regulus spoke much anyway. He answered only when Amaryllis or Evans addressed him directly and only discussed the brewing instructions with Isa when absolutely necessary. He didn’t exchange words with James, of course.

Regulus was glad with this arrangement. He was there, he did what he needed to do, but he remained detached, separate from this strange blend of people at the table and distanced himself from their

conversation. That particular evening, he was even more glad with the arrangement than usual, seeing that Valentine's Day was the topic of conversation now that the horrible celebration was only a few days away.

"So, you going with someone to Hogsmeade for Valentine's, then?" Evans asked Amaryllis with a grin.

Sirius snorted. "Going with Crouch?"

Amaryllis shot him a look — sarcastic, but teasing. "Barty and I haven't dated in over a year, Sirius. And he's with Warrington now."

James looked up, surprised. "Warrington? Eira Warrington?"

"Yeah, why?" Amaryllis asked.

Regulus didn't look up, choosing instead to focus very deliberately on slicing his valerian roots. He knew James knew that Eira had been after Regulus for months.

James shrugged, but his voice gave him away. "No, nothing. Just… curious."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "And here I actually kind of liked her."

Regulus suppressed both the urges to roll his eyes and to point out that people hardly cared for Sirius Black's blessing.

"They're actually getting quite serious, I think," Amaryllis added.

Regulus knew that was true. Barty had spent the last week subtly-not-subtly pestering Isa for advice about the Valentine's date — what to wear, what to buy, where to take her. Regulus had suspected it before, but it was now painfully clear that Barty properly fancied her.

Strangely, Regulus found himself agreeing with Sirius for once. He didn't like Warrington either — but not because she like Barty but because of the constant giggling and the honest to Salazar insufferable laughter.

"And you?" Amaryllis asked Sirius, turning toward him. "Romantic Valentine's date lined up?"

Sirius snorted. "Nah. Not dating anyone. And, as all my friends are once again single on Valentine's, I'll be spending the day with these pricks."

Evans and Amaryllis laughed.

Then Amaryllis looked at James. “You never really date, do you?”

Regulus stiffened.

Oh. They were venturing into waters he’d really, *really* rather avoid.

He suddenly became very interested in finely dicing his valerian root. He could feel the discomfort radiating off Isa — and James.

“Nah,” Sirius said. “Prongs is a gentleman. Won’t settle for anything less than the real deal. No meaningless flings for him.”

James gave a little cough. It was utterly awkward.

Regulus risked a glance.

James was looking at his notes with so much concentration it almost seemed violent, and he ran a hand through his hair in that restless way of his.

Regulus looked back to his potion.

“Oh!” Amaryllis said, suddenly remembering. “You mean the secret lover? With the black curls he used to write letters to?”

Sirius barked a laugh, Amaryllis and Evans joining in.

Regulus winced. A jolt of sadness punched through him. It was so unexpected that it punched the air out of his lungs.

They were *joking*.

Joking about a secret lover like it was something stupid. Something laughable.

They had no idea.

They had no idea that the person James had written to wasn’t some silly, childish schoolboy crush. They had no idea that Regulus was the love of his life. No idea that James was Regulus’s, too. They had no idea that they had defied everything — every rule, every expectation. Had no idea how much they’d had to sacrifice for allowing themselves to love each other, neither how much they’d sacrificed for giving it up.

They had no fucking idea about all the inimate things they had done, the secrets they had shared, the countless times they had woken up naked, limbs tangled. No idea about the fact that Regulus had literally kissed every inch of James's body.

They had no idea that they were both aching, longing for each other, that they had broken their own hearts to save themselves. Because it couldn't be, they couldn't be.

And they were *joking about it*.

Rage flared in Regulus's chest. He let his hands drop beside his body, otherwise unable to hide how they trembled.

He wanted to slap Sirius across the face. Wanted to drag Amaryllis out of the room by her ridiculous hair.

"He's still keeping the identity a secret, though," Sirius teased, nudging James. There was no bite in Sirius's voice whatsoever and if the situation hadn't been what it was, the gesture could have been called affectionate. "We're all starting to think he made them up, actually."

When Regulus saw the painful expression on James's face — which Sirius probably interpreted as something merely a bit embarrassing — he couldn't hold back anymore.

"This isn't a bloody tea party. Shut the fuck up, Sirius," he shot.

The table went quiet.

Sirius looked up, eyebrows raised slightly — surprised.

Regulus immediately regretted it. It had been too sharp, too vicious, almost too personal. His heart raced at the possibility of Sirius piecing it together. It was blatantly clear that he had black curls and well, him being James's secret lover would truly explain why James didn't give his identity away. And Sirius was very clever.

Yet, apparently, the idea of Regulus Black being James Potter's secret lover was so utterly absurd that the entire table just seemed to think that Regulus was in a bad mood.

"Alright," Isa said in a welcome attempt to diffuse the tension, clearing her throat. "Do we need to reduce the flame for the next step, or is this fine?"

Another beat of silence, and everyone returned to the potion.

Regulus didn't say another word.

*****

Having endured an ambush from Sirius and James, followed by the world's most uncomfortable Potions class, Regulus had thought — rather foolishly — that he'd experienced the worst of strange encounters with James Potter.

He was wrong, of course. Life had more in store. And it would be much more bizarre.

He was sitting at a desk in the old Charms classroom on the third floor, hunched over his Defence textbook. He'd brought a leisure read with him, a kind of reward for when he finished his essays, but unfortunately, the homework was taking twice as long as he'd expected and the clock was ticking fast. He had resigned himself to the fact that he would not be reading for pleasure that night.

Surprisingly, he wasn't alone. A few rows behind him sat Lupin, equally absorbed in parchment and ink. It marked the fourth time they had studied in each other's company in this classroom. Regulus was surprised not to be bothered by Lupin's presence — otherwise he wouldn't have returned three times.

They never said much. It was, in essence, not unlike sitting in the library several tables apart. But the classroom had one invaluable advantage, and that was there were no interruptions. Lupin wasn't accosted by NEWT-level classmates begging for tutoring and Regulus was spared the incessant simpering of the seventh-year girls — led by Eira Warrington — who had recently transformed the library into a sort of catwalk, more interested in attracting attention than actually studying.

And Lupin, as it turned out, was tolerable company. He knew how to be silent. And when he did speak, the werewolf's wit was sharp, his humour dry. Regulus could respect that.

It was a dull Thursday evening, two days before the Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff — which was exactly why Regulus was *not* expecting James Potter to barge into the room.

Or well, at least not in the state he was in.

The door slammed open with a bang that nearly launched both Regulus and Lupin out of their seats.

“MOONY!” James bellowed, arms wide. “My fellow Marauder! My bestest friend in the whole bloody world!” He paused, brow furrowed. “Well — together with Padfoot and Wormtail, obviously.”

Regulus and Lupin exchanged a stunned glance.

What the fuck was happening?

Despite the instant alarm, Regulus felt a brief flicker of hope now that James apparently hadn’t noticed him yet—

“REGULUS!”

Ah. Well. So much for that.

Regulus steeled himself, bracing for whatever mortifying title he’d be saddled with next. After all, if Lupin was the ‘bestest friend’, he could only imagine—

“The *love of my life!*”

Regulus groaned, burying his face in his hands.

There was, mercifully, no one around to witness this except Lupin — though that was already bad enough. Regulus instantly flicked his wand, casting a silencing spell and closing the door. No way that he’d let a bystander overhear whatever rubbish James was going to spout.

Lupin looked at Regulus a bit warily, and then turned to James.

“What are you doing Prongs?”

James wobbled dramatically, nearly toppling into a chair. He yanked off his glasses and squinted at them like they were the reason he’d nearly tripped over thin air. Then he tried to clean them on his shirt — only succeeding in smearing them worse.

Regulus stared. “What’s wrong with him?”

He turned to Lupin, sharp-eyed. Surely he’d know what had pushed James Potter to barge into the classroom at the third floor, evidently completely sloshed.

Lupin just gave a dry shrug. “Apparently, he’s pissed.”

Regulus shot him a flat glare. “Astute deduction, Lupin. Ten points to Gryffindor.”

James finally managed to flop down onto a desk with a tragic flair. He heaved a massive, theatrical sigh.

“Sirius and I were drowning our sorrows,” he announced grandly. “Turns out I’ve got *loads* of them.”

Another sigh. Then a contemplative nod to himself.

He turned his attention to Lupin, pointing vaguely. “Well, you’d know. Sorrow follows the Blacks around, doesn’t it, Moony?”

Regulus felt his heart give an unpleasant jolt.

“You do know I’m right here, don’t you?” he said flatly.

James blinked like he’d only just noticed. He looked up, squinting at Regulus again.

“Oh, right. Sorry, love. That was rude.”

Regulus choked, actually coughed, heat crawling up the back of his neck. He felt, quite suddenly, completely on edge.

James was in a *state*.

And Regulus really, *really* didn’t want Lupin to be there for it.

He pointedly avoided looking over, but could feel Lupin’s eyes darting between him and James.

No. This was enough. He needed to shut this down before it turned into a complete disaster.

Regulus was still calculating how when he realised James had gone a bit glassy-eyed again. Then he turned, looking at Regulus with a painfully sincere, dreamy expression — one that made Reg’s stomach twist instantly.

“I mean,” James said, voice soft, slurred, far too sincere. “It’s not that *you* give me sorrow — don’t think I regret loving you, Reg.”

Oh no.

Regulus’s eyes widened, a jolt of dread crashing through him. He

could *feel* Lupin watching now — leaning back in his chair, mouth slightly agape, clearly torn between utter disbelief and complete delight.

“No, it’s not you,” James went on, voice thick with alcohol and feeling. “It’s the world. The world’s just… fucked.”

Regulus was frozen. Utterly still.

“I’ve never regretted you. Not once,” James said, like he didn’t even notice there were others in the room. “I’ve regretted lying. To Sirius. To everyone. But not you. Loving you was the most honest thing I’ve ever done.”

The words landed like a brick to the chest — Raw, unfiltered. Dropped like a stone in the middle of the room.

Regulus’s throat went dry and his heart spiked in panic.

Of course James couldn’t have a dramatic, drunken breakdown without an audience. No — bloody Lupin had to be there, sitting in his chair like he was watching a play.

Regulus stood sharply, crossing the room in a few long strides, trying to coax James off the desk without creating more of a scene.

“Alright, that’s enough,” he said, voice low and firm, but surprisingly gentle. “You’re drunk. Go back to your dorm. Sleep it off. Don’t say things you’ll regret in the morning.”

James frowned at him. “Don’t call me James, Reg.”

Regulus arched a brow. “Would you rather I go back to Potter?”

James gave a breathy little laugh, dazed and fond. “You spent a whole bloody year refusing to call me James, didn’t you?”

He sighed again, wistful this time, like he was reminiscing about something.

And then — *no*.

Regulus saw it happening in real time, the memory slotting into place in James’s eyes.

“Oh! D’you remember the first time you said it—”

Regulus *froze*. His spine snapped straight.

James had been in his bed. His hands on him. His lips on Regulus's throat. Arms wrapped round his—

"Come for me, James."

Fuck.

Regulus turned slowly, horror washing over him. A glance at Lupin showed he'd made some sort of strangled noise — somewhere between a laugh and a cough — trying very hard not to completely lose it. It was *very* clear now that James was reminding Regulus of something very intimate.

James caught Regulus's look.. "Alright, sorry. I just— I meant *Jame*. I like when you call me Jame."

Regulus groaned. That really wasn't any better.

Lupin clearly disagreed — he definitely thought this was better and actually laughed now. Out loud. His eyes flicked to Regulus with open amusement — and a strange sort of curiosity, like he was seeing something he hadn't thought possible.

It made Regulus utterly uncomfortable.

"Come *on*," he said, sharper now, grabbing James's arm. "Let's go. Dormitory. Now."

But James had turned to Lupin again, clearly still floating in his intoxicated little dream world.

"Look at him, Moony," he sighed, voice reverent. "He's *ridiculously* fit, isn't he?"

Regulus let out a sound of pure mortification.

James grinned, nodding earnestly. "The curls. The cheekbones. The bloody eyes. He looks like he's stepped out of some tragic French novel. So bloody beautiful."

For a moment, the room was completely silent.

Regulus's mind was racing, trying to calculate some form of damage control. James *had* to leave. But if he left — would he go and start this conversation somewhere else? With Sirius? Oh no. That could *not*

happen. At least Lupin knew about him and James. No, James had to go somewhere no one could overhear his declarations of love.

But there was no time to think, because James wasn't done.

"And no — yes, they look alike. But they're not the same."

Regulus blinked.

He realised, then, that James was talking about him and Sirius.

And James was still rambling, feet swinging like a schoolboy's, very clearly not even considering heading for the dormitory anytime soon.

"You know I love you lot," he said earnestly, waving an arm in a vaguely affectionate circle. "And you're all gorgeous — really, Moony, you've got a cracking jawline — but when *Reg* loves…"

Regulus froze. "No. No, James. Don't—"

"It's like a bloody symphony," James said, utterly sincere. "The most beautiful song I've ever heard."

Regulus groaned, dragging a hand over his face. This was actual torture.

Lupin, who had been halfway to laughing again, fell silent. There was something shifting in his expression. The amusement ebbed, and the tragedy of it all seemed to sink in.

A short, awkward silence followed.

Regulus almost wished Lupin would start laughing again. Anything was better than this rawness, this exposed vulnerability James was laying out in front of someone else.

James, of course, was still utterly oblivious.

"Not many people've seen that side of him," he said, smiling to himself. "When he laughs properly. When it's real." A pause. "Best feeling in the world. Making him laugh."

Regulus stared at him. He could tell James was close to crying — and he truly, *truly* didn't want James to cry his heart out there.

"Oh for *fuck's* sake," Regulus muttered, turning to Lupin with a look of desperation. "What the hell do we do with him?"

Lupin gave a shrug, evidently trying to throw some humour in the mix. “Well, *you’re* the love of his life. I’m sure you can sort it out. Or should I make myself scarce?”

Regulus shot him a sarcastic glare. “Aren’t you his ‘bestest friend’, Lupin?”

Lupin smirked. “I think ‘love of someone’s life’ outranks ‘bestest mate’, to be honest.”

James, still smiling in his weirdly fond, tipsy haze, pointed at Lupin. “Doesn’t mean I don’t love you, Moony.”

Then, in a sudden turn, he leaned conspiratorially towards Lupin.

“Did you know, Moony,” he whispered, “that when he stubs his toe or drops something, he doesn’t swear in English? He swears in *French*.”

“Alright, James,” Regulus said sharply. He tried to force his voice into something firm and unwavering, but it came out very strained. “Let’s wrap it up here.”

But James wasn’t done. His expression softened further, his tone slipping into something quieter.

“And when he sleeps,” he said, “he draws these little shapes on my head. For hours, sometimes. I try to figure out what he’s drawing, but I never can. He even does it in his sleep.”

The humour evaporated. The air turned heavy, brittle. Regulus didn’t speak. He couldn’t — his mouth had gone completely dry.

James wasn’t just drunk anymore.

He was lost. Broken.

“James.” Regulus’s voice cracked on the name. He cleared his throat and tried again, louder this time. “*James*. Stop. Now.”

James turned to him with watery eyes. Then looked at Lupin, the drunken glow gone from his face, replaced by something quiet and bare.

“Moony,” he said, voice small, “can I… talk to him? Just us?”

Lupin hesitated, gaze flicking to Regulus, unreadable. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea, Prongs.”

Regulus immediately snapped, voice biting. “Didn’t you want me to ‘sort it out’ two minutes ago?”

Lupin gave him a sharp look. “Always a delight, Black.”

Still, with a sigh, Lupin stood and gathered his things. He turned to James. “You’ve got the map?”

James shook his head, blinking slowly. “No… Sirius has it.”

Regulus was too startled by this entire situation to give the mentioning of an unknown map a second thought.

Lupin looked at James, a glance passing between them.

“…Alright. Be careful,” he said at last, quiet.

James nodded, surprisingly serious.

Then Lupin turned to Regulus, his face hardening instantly.

“If anything happens to him,” he said calmly, “I know where to find you, Black.”

Regulus raised a brow, torn between feeling touched, irritated and slightly impressed.

But James cut in first, still dreamily smiling. “Reg won’t hurt me, Moony.” He turned to Regulus with soft eyes. “Right, love?”

Regulus didn’t answer. He was too busy trying to make sense of these bloody mood swings.

It was the first time he’d ever seen James drunk — and he decided, quite firmly, that he’d be glad to never see it again.

He turned serious, glancing at Lupin.

“I’ll make sure he gets through the night,” he said quietly.

Lupin studied him for a beat, eyes narrowed slightly, then nodded once and slipped out of the room — leaving them in the silence that followed.

*****

Seeing the state James was in — a stumbling disaster with loose lips

and no filter — Regulus came to one swift, unshakable conclusion: there was absolutely no way he could allow him to return to Gryffindor Tower tonight. Merlin knew who he might run into on the way, and Merlin knew what he'd spout to Sirius once there.

No. James had to sleep it off somewhere far away and only return to the outside world when he was sober and no longer a walking catastrophe.

So, with a rising, alarming kind of anxiety twisting in his chest, Regulus guided them to the seventh floor, slipping through the castle as quietly as possible — or, well, at least, *he* tried to. James, of course, seemed determined to sabotage any chance of stealth. He tripped on nearly every other stair, and at one point Regulus had to yank him bodily behind a suit of armour when two fifth-years turned the corner ahead of them. James barely managed to stifle a laugh as they crouched there, giggling so hard Regulus was forced to cast a Silencio on him.

And yet, by some miracle, they made it to the Come and Go Room without further incident.

Regulus stood before the blank stretch of wall and hesitated. The obvious room to ask for was the familiar one — the bedroom with the ensuite shower. But somehow, he couldn't. He *wouldn't*. It brought up too many memories, and with James like this — spiralling into all forms of sloppy affection and love declarations — it was already far too tempting.

And he could not give in. Not just because it would be wrong — James was far too drunk to make sense of anything — but also because they shouldn't. They couldn't reopen that wound. Not again.

So, Regulus asked for something simpler.

A modest guest room appeared, quiet and neutral. Just a fireplace, soft lighting, and a bed in the centre of the room — which James immediately flopped onto with a groan.

Then, apparently coming to the realisation that he was, in fact, lying on a bed, James peeked up at Regulus, grinning. "So is this my cue to seduce you?"

Regulus rolled his eyes, but his voice was soft when he replied. "You are entirely too drunk to seduce anyone, Potter."

James groaned again, dramatically flopping onto his back. “Ugh, I *know*. I shouldn’t have drunk so much. Shouldn’t have let Sirius talk me into it. Actually, no, wait — I talked *myself* into it. That’s worse, isn't it?”

Regulus didn’t respond. Instead, he knelt at the edge of the bed and tugged off James’s shoes, setting them neatly aside. Then he reached for the folded pyjamas the room had conjured.

“Sit up,” he said quietly.

James blinked at him, clearly too out of it to fully understand what was happening, but he obeyed anyway. Regulus began undressing him gently — outer robes first, then the jumper, then the button-up shirt — unfastening each button slowly, sternly forcing himself not to think about all the times he’d done this before.

At some point, James seemed to catch on. He stared at Regulus with that soft, drunken gaze, eyes glass, letting his limbs be moved without resistance.

“You’re so…” James trailed off, then smiled, drunk and dreamy. “You’re so sweet, Reg.”

Regulus sighed, voice low. “You’re useless in this state. You need to sleep.”

He helped James into the pyjama set, buttoned it up carefully, and then forced him to brush his teeth before pulling back the covers.

“In you go.”

James crawled in clumsily, collapsing into the pillows with a contented sigh. He purred when Regulus tucked the blanket around him — smoothing it over his chest, tucking it beneath his arms.

James was watching him.

His hair was a beautiful mess as always. A faint flush had risen on his cheeks — subtle, but definitely there.

How much he loved that blush.

It truly wasn’t easy to make James — the amicable, confident, smug Gryffindor Captain — blush, and it never failed to warm Regulus anytime it happened. There was not much better than the knowledge

that he had caused that. That he could have that effect on him.

James eyes were deep, every fleck of hazel and gold a new current in an endless ocean.

Fuck, he was beautiful.

Regulus looked away, the silence suddenly unbearable. He needed to speak — to fill the room with something, anything to distract him from James and his beautiful eyes and his pretty blush.

“Why did you drink so much?”

James stared up at the ceiling, lashes fluttering.

“I dunno,” he whispered. “Sirius was in a mood. The world’s a mess. The war… all of it.”

Regulus waited. The silence stretched.

And then — James’s voice cracked.

“I miss you, Reg.”

The word landed with a punch, sending an ache blooming in Regulus’s chest instantly.

He didn’t know what to say. James turned his head to look at him again, gaze heavy.

“I wish the world was different.”

Regulus nodded slowly, sitting down at the edge of the bed. His voice was barely a whisper. “Yes. Me too.”

James reached out, fingers brushing Regulus’s hand.

“Will you… lie next to me?”

Regulus hesitated.

“I just want to feel your drawing one more time,” James whispered.

He looked so helpless. James Potter, the most confident, cheerful boy to walk the castle, looking utterly defeated, full of sorrow. It didn’t suit him. It felt like a crime against nature and humanity alike.

Regulus exhaled. The room responded, conjuring soft clothes for him. He nodded to himself, changed into a comfortable shirt and trousers, and climbed into bed beside James. He didn't lie down — instead, he sat against the headboard and gently patted his lap.

James blinked up at him, then smiled. It was not just any smile — soft and warm and radiant like Regulus had just given him the world.

It made something in Regulus's chest pull tight.

James settled, head in his lap, eyes already fluttering shut. Regulus's hand found its way into his hair — thick and slightly tangled, familiar beneath his fingers. He began tracing slow, gentle shapes. Little loops, arcs, spirals.

Aimless curves that didn't seem to signify anything, but held so much meaning.

I miss you too. I wish the world was different too. I love you.

Chapter End Notes

Aaah poor James, he's going through it.

I cut off this chapter, there was a very nice scene at the end but I've decided to leave it for the next chapter. Curious to know what you think. Your comments and kudos make my day (or week). ♥

Chapter 21: Of Gnawing & Revelations

Chapter Notes

> Aah, here we are again! I'm (miraculously) still alive (oh the 2000 miles in 40 hours did truly almost kill me) and the creative juices are flowinggg. I wish I had more time to write, though, I'm just bursting but I have a last-minute big ass research proposal to write all of a sudden.
>
> This chapter is long again (almost 9k), which will give you something until I can post the next one, which will be somewhere next week.
>
> Let me know what you think. ❤
>
> P.S.: It's late and I'm severely sleep deprived, so pray with me for no typos.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning, Regulus was woken by the unholy blare of an alarm. He fumbled for his wand, silenced it with a sharp flick and blinked blearily at the sight of the room around him.

James was lying next to him, groaning at the noise and clutching his head as if his skull was being split open. Regulus re-cast the concealing spell over the Mark and took a brief moment to get used to the unpleasant sensation of the spell.

Although he had spent the entire night with James's head on his chest — just like old times — Regulus now did his best to keep a respectful distance while the hungover boy stirred.

James groaned again, pressing the heels of his hands into his temples, before he cracked one eye open, squinting blearily. Regulus quickly passed him his glasses.

James pushed them onto his nose with a soft groan. "R-Reg?" he croaked, his voice hoarse and strained as he took in the sight of Regulus beside him.

Regulus didn't answer immediately. Instead, he gave James a moment to catch up, to let the memories settle. Regulus could see it happening: the slow, dawning horror crossing his face, the way he squeezed his

eyes shut for a moment, then peeked around the room, piecing things together.

Finally, James's gaze landed on Regulus, then the bed.

"Oh — I'm — I'm sorry, Reg," he rasped, wincing.

Regulus shook his head slightly, voice calm. "It's alright, James."

James groaned again, rubbing his temples. "Oh, I made a complete idiot of myself, didn't I?"

Regulus couldn't suppress a small smile. "More or less, yes."

James visibly flinched, covering his face with his hands for a second, his mind clearly again going over the night before. When he dropped his hands, his eyes were wide, almost pleading.

"Oh God. Moony…" he whispered, dread in his voice.

Regulus said nothing, only watched him.

James looked like a disaster — even more than usual. His hair was an utter mess, sticking up in a dozen impossible directions and he had big, dark bags under his eyes. And still — or perhaps even because of this — he was beautiful. Regulus liked the private, unguarded James more than anything. This was a version of James only the most intimate people ever got to see. The version Regulus had always loved best.

James's gaze flicked down to the bed again, lingering on the rumpled sheets between them.

"We… I think I remember most of it but... the bed — did we...?" His voice trailed off awkwardly.

Regulus snorted. "You think I'd take advantage of you when you were that sloshed?"

A small, sheepish smile flickered across James's face. It sent the familiar flutter through Regulus's chest, followed instantly by a crushing sorrow. Just another painful reminder of what his heart longed for but could never have.

"Yeah, I was pretty far gone," James admitted, forcing Regulus back to the matters at hand. James rubbing the back of his neck.

Regulus nodded, a faint smile on his lips, and pushed himself out of bed to gather his robes. James stayed put, half-buried in the blankets, his eyes tracking every one of Regulus's movements.

"I'm — I'm sorry though, Reg," James said suddenly, voice rough. "I wasn't in a good place and… well. I don't want you to suffer with me. I just—"

"Don't, James," Regulus said quickly, turning back to face him. His voice was soft but firm. "It's alright. It's... hard. But nothing irreversible happened. We'll just have to carry on again, you know?"

James nodded, but his eyes squeezed shut, his face twisting slightly as if he were fighting back tears.

Regulus looked away, blinking hard in an attempt to get rid of the familiar sting behind his eyes at the sight of James.

He needed to leave — desperately. He knew if he'd stayed a moment longer— or if James ventured into those familiar subjects — he wouldn't be able to push down the emotions anymore. And he truly didn't need an emotional breakdown just before breakfast.

Yet, he also knew that it was now or never.

There was another conversation that he really needed to have, and as it was incredibly hard to find himself alone with James — even more without raising suspicions — this would probably be one of his only chances. If he didn't ask now, he might never have another chance.

So he steeled himself and sat back down on the edge of the bed, facing away from James, staring instead at the opposite wall. His hands clenched briefly in the folds of his robes.

His voice was barely more than a whisper.

"Are you going to fight?"

A silence stretched between them — so thick Regulus could feel it pressing against his skin. He felt James tense beside him.

"Are *you*, Reg?" James asked, his voice low and wary.

Regulus winced, swallowing the bile rising in his throat.

"Don't," he said, finally looking back at him. His voice cracked despite himself. "Don't fight, Jame."

James's eyes were wet with unshed tears, and although that already sent a painful pang through his body, it was nothing compared to the feeling that mastered Regulus when he saw something else flicker in those beautiful hazel eyes — a fire, a certain determination.

"You can't ask that of me," James said, his voice barely audible but firm.

"Why not?" Regulus asked, almost pleading.

"I can't do nothing, Reg," James said, his hands clenching in the sheets. "I have to fight for something better. For a future that's worth living in. For my friends. For my family. For everyone who can't fight for themselves." He swallowed hard. "I want to join my parents."

Regulus closed his eyes for a moment. He had expected this answer, of course, had known it. Yet it didn't stop it from feeling like he was just punched in the gut.

He understood, though. Understood how James's path had been set, how it had been forged like his own. Their paths just happened to be different, irreversibly split. Standing on opposite sides of the same broken road.

James sat up now, pushing his messy hair out of his face. He looked at Regulus with a sharpness and ferocity in his eyes that should be impossible in his current hungover state.

"Are you going to fight, Reg?" he asked, fixing Regulus with a fierce, searching look.

The question knocked the air from his lungs.

He had no idea what to answer to this — surely, he had to lie, but how could he cover up that it was no question of future tense. How was he going to brush past the fact that he was already elbows, knees, and heads deep in the Revolution?

How was he going to avoid explaining that he was Marked long ago? That he was one of the most trusted? The inner circle of the Dark Lord, at the age of only sixteen?

How to get past the fact that he had already killed and had already seen die?

How to not think about the fact that he had been the crucial player in

the most brutal prison break of the modern time?

James's next words were a whisper, but they felt like a shout in the quiet of the room.

"Would you — would you fight if they asked you to? Would you truly join him, Reg?"

Regulus looked away again, fixing his gaze on the far wall. He was scrambling for the words that just didn't come.

James's voice broke through the heavy silence, splintered and raw.

"Would you — would you join him? While… having been with a boy? Having been with… me?"

The words struck like a curse.

A heavy quiet followed, but in his head, Regulus heard Torne's voice echo.

It's all connected. Hate for Muggleborns, hate for Halfbloods. Hate for everyone who… loves differently.

He closed his eyes briefly, swallowing against the sick feeling in his gut.

"Don't join him, Reg," James whispered, barely audible. "Don't fight, Reg. Don't fight."

Regulus let out a heavy breath.

"Not really fair of you, is it?" he said, voice low. "Asking me not to fight, when you're going to?"

James flinched, his mouth twisting painfully. "You're doing the same to me, aren't you?"

Regulus considered that for a moment.

James pressed on, urgency cutting through the hoarseness of his voice. "I'll be fighting for the right side, Reg. I'll be fighting for a better future—"

That same sharp irritation Regulus had felt during the discussion with Sirius in the Entrance Hall mastered him instantly.

"James, that's what everyone says," Regulus said sharply.

James shook his head vehemently, his voice rising and evidently winning from the hangover. "No, Reg, there is right and wrong. Sure, everyone *thinks* they're right, but there is something called ethics — something called morals. There is a right side to history, and a wrong one."

Regulus looked at him then, truly looked — and saw a fire, a ferocity in him that took him off guard. He didn't want to start that modernism and traditionalism debate again, and instead settled for a sigh.

"It's not always that simple, James."

James frowned deeply. "What do you mean by that?"

Regulus shrugged, trying to stay composed. "It's not always that simple. War is complicated, James, there's so much more to the story —"

James interrupted him, his eyes pinning Regulus under a fierce and worried glare. "Are they — are they forcing you, Reg?"

This took him by surprise. "What?"

"Are they going to force you to fight?" James continued, his voice growing even stronger.

Regulus shook his head, trying to find the right words. He didn't want to launch them into the familiar political debate, but also wanted to make clear that reality wasn't all that simple. That reality wasn't a fairytale. Wasn't a story of heroes and villains.

"War is complicated, James. There's a whole bloody mess beneath it — family alliances, political allegiances, decades of bad blood. It's not just about fighting, James. I... I'm the heir." His voice rose despite himself, cracking. "I'm the Heir, James. Sirius left. *I'm the heir.*"

It felt like the words tore themselves free from his chest — ripping and shredding. His throat tightened painfully, his heart pounding violently.

James stood too, facing him fully now, his face so compassionate it made bile rise in Regulus's throat.

"I know, Reg," James said, softly. "I know."

And then — for the first time — James finally asked the question Regulus had felt lingering between them for so long. The question Regulus had felt hovering on James's lips more times than he could count. The question Regulus knew had played in James's head so often, but was never spoken aloud. Until now.

James's voice, rough with hope and fear, broke the last barrier between them.

"Do you want to leave?"

And there it was. The crux. The heart of it all.

Did he want to leave?

He thought about his life. Thought about the people he would leave behind. Thought about Cissy, who had always been like a sister. Cissy, who'd always fought for him, who'd always stood at his side, who had done so many things for him while herself being a child still. Cissy, who had meant more to him than his own parents.

He thought about Lucius — cold and composed to the world, but a guardian behind closed doors. Lucius who knew everything that had happened to Regulus and hadn't even flinched at it. Lucius who had joined forces with Mr. Nott to bring justice to Regulus's past, who had offered Regulus to be a part of it if he wanted, but had understood why Regulus hadn't wanted to. Always respecting Regulus's boundaries, continuing the trend his wife had forged.

He thought of Mother. Of how much she'd loved Sirius — still did — and how Sirius had never understood the way she loved. He thought of the shame Regulus had brought to the House of Black, how he had sullied the name even before Sirius had. And how, despite all, it seemed to finally settle. He thought of the fleeting moments Mother had smiled at him, had even admitted that she was proud of him. He thought of the evening Sirius left, when she had gripped his hand tightly, begging him.

Don't leave me, Regulus. Don't leave me like he did.

And he thought about his friends. About Evan, about Barty. About their families and their pasts and their roles in the Revolution in the near future. All the grey lines to be walked.

And lastly, he thought of Isa.

Isa, the eldest Nott daughter. Isa, who wanted so much more from life than their world could give her. Isa, who without the protection of her father and Regulus would fall prey to things Regulus couldn't even properly explain.

No, he could never leave her behind.

Because if he did — if he paid that price, the price of losing his surrogate sister, his friends, of Isa— what would it be for? A war fought alongside those whose vision for the world was as alien to him as much of his own side's? A future he didn't truly believe in? A war that'd be most probably won by the traditionalists anyway?

Too much to give up. Too many people he loved.

And for what?

He let out a slow, shuddering breath.

"No," he whispered.

Their eyes met across the small space between them. James's gaze shattered, the hurt plain in his eyes, making its way into the depth of Regulus's soul.

James swallowed hard, then reached for his wand.

"We have to go," James said roughly. "Breakfast is almost over."

Regulus nodded stiffly.

James hesitated. His voice was hoarse and low. "Thank you… for… you know, keeping an eye on me."

Regulus only nodded again, unable to find his voice.

*****

The conversation with James had left a heavy, mournful weight lodged somewhere deep in Regulus's chest — one that he couldn't seem to shake, no matter how hard he tried.

It wasn't for lack of distraction, though.

His first problem was covering for his absence from the dormitory

with a plausible lie. Luckily, Isa had — once again — come to his rescue with a well-fabricated excuse. Regulus didn't miss the glances she kept shooting toward the Gryffindor table throughout the day, her expression carefully unreadable.

She didn't say anything and Regulus didn't offer an explanation either, though he was sure that the truth was, for once, far less scandalous than whatever scenarios were playing out in Isa's head.

Another distraction came in the form of Professor Valaine.

It was Regulus's first class with her since Hohenhain and he did everything he could to act normal as he slid into his usual seat beside Isa. He could not drop a single clue, could not make mistakes, could absolutely not give her a reason to doubt him any more than she evidently already did.

It was harder than he expected.

It was very hard not to let something show, to not betray with his eyes that there was a connection between him and her — one he knew existed and she only suspected. They had stood wand-to-wand, fought one another — he had sliced her hand off. And she might even have tried to save him, though the memory was so clouded that he wasn't sure if that had been real. And if it had been, he had no bloody clue *why* she'd done it.

Regulus painstakingly realised he was doing a horrible job at going unnoticed as the Professor's gaze kept boring into him through the entire double period, pinning him like a butterfly to a board.

And of course, if that wasn't enough, his friends were doing a brilliant job of making everything even worse.

With Valaine having been ill on numerous occasions — which Regulus now realised weren't due to any sort of illness but rather to her moonlighting as an Auror — the class was still on duelling, although they had now moved to the practical part.

Valaine sat at her desk, her voice smooth as she surveyed the room.

"Right," she said. "Who here actually has some experience in the practical side of duelling?"

Predictably, Evan and Barty exchanged wicked looks, both wearing identical smug expressions.

Valaine turned her head toward them.

"Why am I not surprised," she said, voice dripping with a kind of slow amusement despite herself. "Are either of you actually any good?"

Barty grinned. "Good, Professor?" he said, as though the word were laughably inadequate. "We're brilliant." He shot a glance at the row behind him. "But Black's the best."

Regulus's heart immediately kicked up, hammering against his ribs. Sweat prickled at the back of his neck. His mind raced through desperate possibilities to shut them up without drawing more attention. Fuck. *Fuck*.

Too late.

Valaine turned to him, her gaze stripping him bare with terrifying force.

"Oh, really?" she said, voice light but unmistakably sharp.

"Yes, Professor," Amaryllis chimed in enthusiastically. "He even won a duel against Professor Thorne last year!"

There were murmured agreements around the room.

Regulus froze, clamping down on every instinct that screamed at him to either run or hex someone. He did neither of those and instead forced himself to sit still and compose, to act indifferent. For a moment, though, he thought Valaine might press it — might make a spectacle of it.

But, mercifully, she only nodded once, like she was filing the information away for later. Regulus wasn't quite sure whether to be glad with this, but he shoved down the discomfort.

"Well," she said, rising from her chair, "we'll see about that."

She flicked her wand, and the tables obediently slid to the edges of the room, clearing a space in the centre.

"Showtime! Everyone up."

At once, the class obeyed, shuffling into the cleared space.

"Professor, if you don't mind me asking — why are you using your wand again?" Melania asked.

Regulus winced internally, inhaling slowly through his nose.

God. Life really needed to give him a fucking break.

"Yes, Professor," Amaryllis added. "Your wandless magic was so impressive!"

Valaine smiled, but it didn't meet her eyes in the slightest. Regulus suppressed the shiver about to run down his spine.

"Thank you, Miss Greengrass," she said smoothly. "My hand was injured. It's still in recovery. Using my wand makes things easier, for now."

Her gaze flickered across the students — and landed, inevitably, on Regulus.

He felt it hit him like a physical thing.

He tensed instinctively and felt Isa stiffen beside him too.

Yes. There was no denying it anymore.

She knew. She truly, *truly* knew.

Fuck.

*****

Regulus knew life had a way of being cruel to him, so it really shouldn't have been a surprise that, precisely when forgetting about James was both harder and more necessary than ever, Gryffindor was scheduled to play Hufflepuff.

Everything in him screamed not to go — not to subject himself to the torment of watching James fly for Merlin knew how long. But he was the Slytherin Captain, so he had no choice. He had to be there, study the match, track every detail for future strategy. And that meant laying eyes on the one player who was, without fail, going to dominate every second of the game.

It already felt like torture.

The morning of the game, the Great Hall was buzzing with energy. Everyone was talking excitedly about the game, people were laughing and eating with gusto. Students clustered around the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables, offering last-minute good luck wishes and trading

loud, self-assured predictions about the outcome. Excitement hung in the air like electricity.

Regulus sat with his usual group at the Slytherin table, forcing down eggs and toast despite not feeling even a trace of hunger.

Barty was the first to break the relative quiet, smirking as he stabbed his fork into a sausage.
"So," he said. "Hufflepuff's going to win, right?"

Regulus stirred his coffee in silence for a moment. Deep down, he was somehow touched by Barty's loyalty, supporting Hufflepuff purely because James and Sirius were playing for the opposing team.

Evan picked up the thread, nodding solemnly. "Yeah, obviously. Right, Black?"

Regulus snorted before he could stop himself. "Gryffindor's going to win."

Barty looked at him like he'd just committed treason. "What?"

Regulus shrugged, still stirring. "Come on, Barty. Be realistic. No one's beating the Macmillans-Potter trio. It's not happening."

Amaryllis leaned in. "You think there'll be scouts?"

"Yes. Definitely," Regulus said, keeping his voice carefully even.

He did not — would not — look at Isa. Talking about James was hard enough. Talking about James and his near-mythical Quidditch talent, while Isa sat there knowing exactly who James was to Regulus, was almost unbearable.

Barty scoffed loudly, as if Regulus had just suggested something unthinkable instead of just offering a truth so obvious it was almost painful. It was like fire being hot, the sky being blue — James Potter being a Quidditch prodigy. Even his most dedicated haters had long since been forced into reluctant surrender on that point.

Evan shrugged. "We'll just hope for the best then."

Regulus nodded, though he knew it was utterly futile.

Against his better judgement, his gaze flickered to the Gryffindor table. James and Sirius were laughing together, visibly excited for the game. People flowed toward them, offering handshakes, pats on the

back, words of encouragement. James, already in his Quidditch gear, looked every bit the captain — confident, bright, magnetic. He was effortlessly handsome, effortlessly charismatic. He was the kind of bloke who could pull everyone into his orbit without even trying.

Regulus felt his heart skip a beat.

But then he felt Isa's eyes on him again and forced himself to look away.

This was going to be actual, unrelenting torture.

*****

Barty was quickly forced to concede that Regulus had been right.

It was a beautiful game — and brutal. Gryffindor tore through Hufflepuff with such ease it bordered on cruelty. Less than an hour in, it was already clear to everyone in the stadium that there would be no mercy for Hufflepuff.

The teams realised this too, with the Hufflepuff Seeker, Edgar Bones, careening around the pitch in frantic, increasingly desperate arcs, while the Gryffindor team relaxed into something that looked more like a joyous aerial ballet than a match — they were laughing, looping, flinging the Quaffle between them, clearly having the time of their lives.

James intercepted a pass from Dora Macmillan mid-spin — one hand, clean — then tucked into a steep dive. The stadium gasped — one massive, collective breath drawn in awe.

Regulus had seen it so many times — in matches, in practice, in the period when they'd played on the same team — and still, it amazed him. The way James sat on his broom like it was part of him. The wind tugging at his always wild hair. The ease in every motion. As though flying was something he was born doing.

He veered beneath a Hufflepuff Beater, twisted through a gap that looked physically impossible, and hurled the Quaffle through the centre hoop with precision and force that drew stunned silence — then thunderous applause.

"Potter!" the commentator exclaimed, half-laughing, half in shock. "Is that legal? *Is* there a rule against style so excessive it's indecent?"

Isa let out a quiet breath beside him. “Wow,” she murmured. “He really is… wow.”

Regulus swallowed hard, eyes still tracking James through the air. “Yeah,” he said, voice barely audible. “I know.”

Sirius veered toward James with a shout, both of them soaring into the air, whooping as they met mid-flight, punching fists together in an airborne celebration.

Regulus’s throat felt dry, suddenly all too tight with a strange mix of melancholy and jealousy. Just a few seconds, a brief moment in time, a glimpse of a Quidditch match and he was once again reminded of their world — his brother and his… James, so alive, so golden and in their element. A world Regulus could never be a part of.

Luckily, the feeling subdued once he’d torn his gaze away. Across the stands, he spotted several scouts, scribbling notes and murmuring excitedly to each other.

Pride flared in his chest, drowning out all the rest. Everyone could see what he saw in James — could see how brilliant he was. And today, the right people were watching. It would be acknowledged, recognised.

In the end, Gryffindor won with 360 to 70 points.

Unfortunately, it took ages for the stands to begin to clear. Regulus and the rest of the group were stuck behind a slow-moving line of Hufflepuffs that even with Barty’s threats to hex everyone in their way, didn't move faster.

“Snape was right,” Mulciber complained, visibly annoyed. “Wasted morning. Just another day in the life of Potter worship.”

“Oh, come on,” said Amaryllis, tying her scarf with a bit too much force. “You’ve got to admit he was formidable.”

“He was *something*,” Melania added. “You think he’ll go pro?”

Regulus didn’t join the conversation, not trusting his voice to come out steady. He was overcome with a sudden urge to get away as soon as possible from the James talk. The stands were still too packed though, so he was unfortunately stuck with his friends who just wouldn’t drop the subject.

He glanced down at the pitch and saw Sirius walking away from the locker room flanked by the Macmillan sisters, head thrown back in laughter. The rest of the team was filing out behind him — all except James.

So he was still inside.

Regulus didn't think, didn't plan. There was no logic to it, only a strange pull in his chest — sharp and inexplicable.

"Ah — I forgot something," he said abruptly. "Left it in the locker rooms the other day. I'll catch up."

He didn't wait for questions and didn't even catch the replies from his friends because he was already descending the stairs, weaving through the crowd — way easier solo — and cutting across the grass.

The moment he stepped inside the locker room, he knew he'd been right. There was one person in the room, and it was a Potter. But it wasn't James.

It was his father.

Fleamont Potter stood near the benches, back to Regulus at first. But when he turned, Regulus felt his breath catch.

He looked older than Regulus's father, but he was handsome in a timeless, patrician kind of way. His hair was slightly greying but thick, quite like James's but not as messy, giving an insight into what James's hair would have looked like if it had been tameable for once. James shared his jawline and posture too, and the same effortless charisma. It hit Regulus there, suddenly and vividly, that James would likely look just like this one day. James would age, as his father, like a fine wine, rich and beautiful.

James didn't have his father's eyes, though. Mr. Potter's eyes were a clear grey. James had his mother's eyes — hazel, golden and bright.

Regulus froze, staring, wide-eyed.

Mr. Potter's face broke into a reserved but unmistakably warm smile.

"Regulus."

It took Regulus a moment too long to respond, heat rising in his face. This was *Mr. Potter* — not just James's father, but patriarch of one of

the oldest and most respected families in the wizarding world. Even most of Regulus's family, despite political differences, would have greeted him with formal courtesy. Certain mores superseded everything, apparently.

"Mr. Potter," he managed finally, way too stiffly for his liking.

Another silence stretched and it took, again, way too long for Regulus to realise that Mr. Potter had his hand stretched out, waiting for Regulus to shake it. Mortified at his bad manners, Regulus took it nervously, shaking it.

"Sorry — I just… I wasn't expecting to see you here, Mr. Potter," he stammered.

Mr. Potter's eyes twinkled with amusement. "Ah. You were looking for my son, then?"

Regulus felt the flush rise higher on his cheeks, and Mr. Potter's smile turned slightly wry, but no less warm.

"When Effie told me James was in love with a Black," he said lightly, "it didn't truly surprise me."

Regulus blinked.

Surely that wasn't true. *Surely* it had been surprising to hear his son had fallen in love with another boy. And not just just any boy, even. The younger brother of his son's best friend. With *Regulus Black*, heir to the House of Black, whose family stood in direct ideological opposition to the Potters in this war.

At the very least, that had to be unexpected.

Mr. Potter chuckled gently, clearly reading the disbelief on his face.

"My son wouldn't be the first Potter to fall for a Black," he clarified. "There've been marriages between our families for generations, as you probably know."

Regulus nodded slowly. Of course he knew this.

"And well," Mr. Potter added, eyes dancing, "you wouldn't be the first son of Orion and Walburga that James fell in love with — or we, for that matter. Though with Sirius it was entirely platonic, of course."

That smile lingered — not unkind, just knowing.

Then he sobered slightly. “There *were* things that did surprise me, though.”

A new silence fell. Regulus’s thoughts immediately spun to Thorne and to Davies. Regulus knew the Potters were informed about Davies [breaking free] by Thorne, as James had eavesdropped on his parents discussing it. Surely they knew by now that Thorne was dead, too.

Still, it was dangerous ground.

He couldn’t let it slip that James had been eavesdropping, and he certainly couldn’t reveal too much about his relationship with Thorne.

Yet, although it was tricky to address this, Regulus felt he could speak more freely with Mr. Potter than with an average person.

“You mean… whatever Thorne has told you?” he asked cautiously.

There was a subtle shift in Mr. Potter’s face, something clicking in place.

“So you know,” he nodded. “You know about Victor’s allegiances.”

Regulus nodded. Somehow he felt that he owed him some clarity, if they didn’t know already.

“He’s dead.”

A heavy silence settled between them.

Regulus couldn’t bring himself to speak the truth, couldn’t confess here, in front of Mr. Potter, that it was him who had killed Victor Thorne. So instead, he offered what he could.

“I saw it happen.”

Mr. Potter didn’t look surprised, but his face fell anyway.

“So young,” he said. “And you’ve already had to witness that.”

Regulus didn’t answer — because what could he say to that? He had seen so much more, had done so much more than Mr. Potter would probably even believe.

Mr. Potter continued quietly. “We hadn’t heard from him in so long. So of course… we assumed. I’m sorry you had to witness it, though.”

Regulus winced. Mr. Potter had no idea.

“Well,” Regulus said finally, his voice a little hoarse, “let’s not pretend other young people will be spared.”

I can’t do nothing, Reg. I have to fight for something better. For a future that’s worth living for. For my friends. For my family. For everyone who can’t fight for themselves.

“I’m sure James will fight too,” Regulus added.

Mr. Potter sighed — a deep, tired sound that seemed to come from his bones.

“Well, yes,” he said. “I’m sure you know how he is. Would try to save the world single-handedly, even if it meant giving up his own life.”

Regulus knew this was true. James was a Gryffindor for a reason — bold, brave and undeniably reckless.

Another silence stretched between them.

Then, almost too quietly to hear, Regulus asked, “Will you… do everything to keep him safe?”

Mr. Potter’s expression tightened, the sadness now plain on his face.

Regulus continued, voice still small. “And Sirius too?”

“I will do everything in my power, Regulus,” Mr. Potter said. His voice was firm, determined, making it feel not like a promise but instead like a vow.

Regulus nodded shortly in response.

Another silence stretched. Mr. Potter opened his mouth, then closed it again, visibly debating how to continue.

“You saved Nathaniel Davies.”

Regulus gave a small nod.

“It makes me wonder,” Mr. Potter said slowly, “if you’re truly aligned with what the Death Eaters call a ‘Revolution’ at all.”

Regulus swallowed. “Why is that?”

“Because… why did you save him?” Mr. Potter’s brow furrowed, his tone open, but confused and probing at the same time. “I don’t know all the details of Victor’s missions. But he told me that part. He told me how you risked your own life to get Nathaniel Davies out — that you must’ve gone through extraordinary lengths. Why?”

Regulus hesitated. He thought again about Thorne’s words, about how killing Davies for loving someone was so cruel.

“He was in love with my best friend,” Regulus said quietly. “Why kill him for that?”

Mr. Potter nodded slowly, thoughtful.

“Alright,” he said. “But then… why not ask the next question?”

Regulus frowned slightly. “What do you mean?”

“Why should anyone,” Mr. Potter said softly, “be told who they’re allowed to love in the first place?”

There was a beat of silence.

“Well,” Regulus commented, forcing himself to keep looking at Mr. Potter despite the feeling of his cheeks flushing. “You’re telling me you weren’t at least a little bit displeased when you heard about… James and me?”

Mr. Potter gave a quiet, wry smile.

“Well, yes,” he said. “But not for the reasons you’re thinking of.”

Regulus shot him a confused gaze.

“Not because you’re a boy,” Mr. Potter clarified. Regulus flushed deeper. “And not because you’re a Black.”

Regulus blinked.

“But because I know that Walburga wouldn’t lose herself two sons. I know it would be so hard for you.”

Regulus was hit by the sudden, sharp ache behind his eyes. Oh, how close to home Mr. Potter’s words hit.

He had truly reached the limit of emotional conversations.

His voice was hoarse when he finally spoke.

“So… you wouldn’t mind the Potter lineage just dying out?”

Mr. Potter let out a quiet chuckle, warm and unbothered. “Oh, Regulus. There are so many more ways than one for a family to live on. And even if it did — the most important thing is love. Children should be born out of love, Regulus. Not out of duty."

Regulus stared at him, stunned. He didn’t know what to say — how to square Mr. Potter’s words with the reality of the life he would be forced to live. The difference between Mr. Potter’s words and the reality of having to marry Isa. Not out of love, but out of duty.

Oh, how shocked everyone would be if they knew he loved a man, not a woman — and not just any man, but James Potter. And he, Regulus, as the heir, could never ever avoid marriage with a woman, could never avoid the responsibility of providing a child.

Mr. Potter seemed to see some of this written on Regulus’s face. His voice was as gentle as his gaze. “Let me tell you something, Regulus.”

Regulus looked up.

“Sometimes, when you’re in the middle of something… it feels impossible. Like there’s no way out, like your fate is carved in stone. But in reality—” he smiled faintly, “—you’re not stuck at all. Things that seem fixed… rarely are.”

Regulus didn’t know what to say, didn’t know how to react to the words lodging somewhere deep in his chest. He was still trying to decipher their meaning when the door burst open.

He flinched instinctively, heart jumping.

James and Sirius stepped into the room. All three of them froze.

Regulus’s entire body tensed. James looked completely caught off guard, his eyes flicking between his father and Regulus in a mix of confusion and alarm. Sirius’s confusion looked more like suspicion, like hostility.

Mr. Potter was the first to recover.

"Ah, boys — there you are.”

James blinked, still looking between his father and Regulus, evidently

processing the scene he had walked in on. “Dad… everything alright?”

Mr. Potter’s voice was smooth and warm. “Oh yes, we just ran into each other.”

Regulus nodded quickly, already taking a step back. “I was just… looking for something. I’m leaving now.”

He turned, very eager to escape, but just as he reached the doorway, he caught a glimpse of James’s eyes and the strange mix of confusion and pain in them.

Regulus hesitated and then suddenly remembered how he was raised, what was expected of him, even in this absurdly uncomfortable situation. He turned back.

“It was nice meeting you, Mr. Potter,” he said quietly.

Mr. Potter gave him a small, warm smile.

“It was nice meeting you too, Regulus.”

*****

Regulus had felt off for the entire week following his conversation with Mr Potter. It was a process of too many thoughts and emotions fighting for dominance inside him, then intertwining, shifting, morphing into something else — and all sparked by a conversation that had lasted less than ten minutes.

He had heard countless stories about James’s father, most of them whispered in the dark, lying beside James, who would talk about his childhood and his parents until Regulus drifted off to sleep. James often spoke of his mother — knowing that was the figure Regulus most longed to hear about — but of course his father had featured plenty too. And now, for the first time, Regulus had met him properly. Had actually spoken with him.

And it left him unsettled.

There was something unspeakably melancholic about having come face to face with the older version of James — the version Regulus so desperately wanted to grow old beside. And yet, he knew he would never have that version close, would perhaps not even meet that one. He shouldn’t even have had this version close, of course.

Still, worse was the ache. The dull, hollowing, suffocating ache that came from knowing just how warm and welcoming — how unconditionally loving — both of James's parents were. He thought of how Mrs. Potter had told him, sincerely, that their door was always open to him, no matter what. And now how Mr. Potter had told him he wouldn't have minded James and Regulus being together at all. How he had only felt sorry because of Regulus's parents.

But then, would Mr. Potter really not mind? Would he truly say the same, if he knew everything? If he knew who Regulus truly was — what Regulus had done?

And then, his words—

Things that seem fixed… rarely are.

Another thought clawing at his chest was the realisation that should have struck him a long time ago, but somehow only now landed.

Thorne had been a spy.

And although the Dark Lord and the Revolutionaries knew that, no one truly knew the scope of it. Except for Regulus. Regulus knew. Regulus knew that Thorne had been close to the Potters — close enough to inform them about Regulus and Davies. Close enough to know that James had an Invisibility Cloak. Close enough to know about James's secret love.

And while Mr. Potter had said he didn't know the full extent of Thorne's missions, Regulus was absolutely certain of one thing.

Dumbledore definitely knew.

Dumbledore *definitely* knew that Regulus was one of the first twelve to be branded with the Mark. He *definitely* knew what Regulus had done to earn it. He definitely knew where Regulus's allegiances lay.

Which left Regulus with two very dangerous questions.

First — why was he still at Hogwarts? Why had Dumbledore allowed a Death Eater to remain in the school, unexpelled, treated like any other student?

And second — what would happen if the Dark Lord found out? What if he knew that all their efforts to keep Regulus's role covert had failed? What if the Dark Lord knew that Dumbledore had known

about Regulus being a Death Eater all along?

Regulus had no idea what to do with any of it. No idea whether to tell the Dark Lord or not. He *should* — of course he should. It was critical that the Revolutionaries knew that all they thought they were doing secretly, perhaps wasn't that secret at all. But telling the truth about Dumbledore meant also telling the truth about Thorne. And that came way too close to Regulus's biggest, deepest secret.

Way too close to James.

So for now… he'd sit with it. He'd let it stew, let it gnaw. He'd make a plan later. When — if — the answer finally clicked into place.

The thoughts still circled restlessly in his mind as he sat at breakfast with Isa on Thursday morning.

He was pouring coffee for both of them when Evan slid into the opposite seat, looking utterly dishevelled — hair tousled, troubled eyes.

Regulus and Isa exchanged a glance.

"What happened to you?" Regulus asked.

"So I was on my way here with Barty…," he started with a sigh, his voice betraying an enormous amount of reluctance and exasperation.

"Where's Barty?" Isa asked.

Evan shot her a pointed look. "We ran into some third-years, one of them mouthed off and Barty started hexing them just as McGonagall came round the corner."

Both Isa and Regulus groaned.

"So," Evan continued, "he got marched off to Slughorn's office. I wasn't allowed to go with him."

Regulus shook his head. "He's really snapping fast these days. That's got to be his fourth outburst this week alone. What's going on with him?"

Isa and Evan shared a look.

Regulus narrowed his eyes. "What?"

Isa sighed. “Eira broke up with him.”

Regulus froze. “*What?* But… didn’t they have that absurdly romantic — and completely unlike Barty — Valentine’s date?”

Isa shrugged. “Yeah, well. I heard it didn’t go particularly well.”

Evan nodded, grimacing. “So now he’s pissed off all the time.”

Isa added, more softly, “It’s hit him hard. I think… I think he was properly in love with her.”

Regulus stared at her. The idea of someone — *Barty*, of all people — being in love with Eira bloody Warrington seemed so absurd he didn’t know how to process it. He could only blink, dumbstruck.

Before he could say anything, though, the morning post arrived.

Regulus, half on autopilot, dropped a few Sickles into the Daily Prophet owl’s pouch and reached for his coffee — when another owl swept down towards him. His stomach sank at the sight.

Cissy’s owl.

He knew this could hardly be anything good. With a sense of dread already curling in his gut, he unrolled the letter, stomach heavy as lead.

Dear Reggie,

How are you, darling? I hope everything’s alright.

Just wanted to let you know that your mother isn’t feeling very well again. It’s nothing serious — certainly not enough to miss classes over — but it would be lovely if you could visit her on Saturday evening, after dinner. I’ll sort everything out with Horace.

I hope you’re keeping well. Lots of love,

Your all-time favourite,

Cissy.

So — a meeting.

Fuck.

*****

The evening of the meeting, Regulus felt something strange gnawing at his gut — a quiet but relentless pressure at the back of his mind, scraping at his nerves without him fully registering it, let alone deciphering it. It wasn't new. It was the same insistent presence that had been simmering beneath the surface for weeks, occasionally flaring without warning. And tonight, for some reason, it peaked again — sharp and persistent. There was no time to untangle it, no space to unpack it, because the overall strangeness of the evening and the eventual revelations would be so jarring they'd overshadow every instinct he'd ignored. No, it would be weeks before he understood what his subconscious had been trying to warn him of for months.

The first disquieting detail was that he had been summoned to a meeting at all. Now, Regulus had come to the conclusion that Dumbledore knew about his role in the Revolution — probably down to the last detail, even — but no one else did. As far as the others were concerned, Regulus's position wasn't yet jeopardised. And with that in mind, it was odd — reckless, even — to call him away from Hogwarts again for something as routine as a meeting. Surely he wasn't crucial to it?

The second unsettling detail was the location. The meeting wasn't being held at Bellatrix's, as usual, nor at Malfoy Manor, which would have been the next obvious choice. Instead, it was held at the Rosiers' estate.

It had been a long time since Regulus had been to Evan's house. It was as grand as any other old pure-blood estate — sprawling grounds, winged horse stables, four floors of ancient luxury — but unlike the cold elegance of many similar houses, the Rosier home had something warmer; the brightly woven rugs in the parlour, the smell of cinnamon in the air, the worn but polished piano in the front room. It was, without a doubt, Mrs. Rosier's touch, bringing soul and warmth to the house.

Regulus was glad that the halls were empty and that he was spared from an uncomfortable encounter with Evan's mother.

When he'd reached the meeting room, he exhaled deeply before pushing the door open. He was met immediately with applause.

“Ah,” came the amused voice from the head of the table, “Regulus — once again, the star of the show.”

He froze mid-step. Heat rose to his cheeks as he took in the room: Yaxley and Lucius winked, Mr. Nott and Mr. Rosier clapped, Rodolphus and others raised fists in salute. Regulus was too stunned to notice the chagrin plain on Bellatrix’s face — something he would’ve thoroughly relished any other time.

He didn’t know how to respond.

He had hardly been the star of the show. If it hadn’t been for Mr Nott, they’d all have died in Hohenhain. And even if they hadn’t, the mission had cost them lives — Antonin Dolohov and Mr. Carrow.

Were they already forgotten?

Regulus gave the room a curt nod and slipped into the seat beside Rabastan. He rested a hand briefly on his shoulder — a quiet show of respect. Rabastan offered him a faint smile.

“Black,” he greeted.

The meeting began without delay.

“This is the first time we’ve convened since the prison break,” the Dark Lord said. “Not for lack of interest — you’ve each been occupied with tasks that required your singular talents. But tonight, I am pleased we have managed to gather at last. What was accomplished at Hohenhain has never been done before. With it, we secured not only freedom for our people... but something far more valuable.”

Regulus suppressed a frown. It felt strange that again the death of Dolohov and Mr. Carrow wasn’t mentioned. The fact that not a single word was dedicated to them before diving into celebrations felt utterly tasteless.

And once more, the sensation stirred — that scraping, gnawing unease just under the surface. He shoved it down, tried to focus. Luckily, it wasn’t a hard task, as distractions were plenty.

He’d thought it would be just another normal meeting — just a routine briefing, a summary of recent events,a preview of what was to come.

He had no idea that it would be here and now that a single casual

mention would crack open the floor beneath him.

They moved quickly. The Dark Lord spoke of the Ministry — how it had begun to respond, pushing back, less and less from the shadows.

“We expect tighter laws,” Lucius said. “Perhaps even desperate reforms in the Wizengamot.”

“Isn’t it a problem,” Rodolphus asked, “that we’re being forced out of the shadows too?”

Regulus understood the concern. Fighting an establishment openly had two main disadvantages: first, that the establishment itself still held most of the power, and second, that open conflict invited public scrutiny. With increased transparency came the risk of losing public favour. It was a risky game; things could very well proceed in such a way that public opinion turned against the Revolutionaries, and fighting openly meant that there was nothing to hide behind if that happened.

Mr. Nott chimed in. “We’ve long suspected the only reason people still support Minchum is the illusion of safety. There’s a large portion of the public that doesn’t care about sides — they just care about stability. If we destabilise that illusion, we create space for opposition. From within.”

“Yes,” the Dark Lord said, with that same measured certainty. “And that is what we will do. Hohenhain was a disaster for Minchum’s administration. The public knows Death Eaters were involved. The scandal is already growing.”

Bellatrix let out a shriek of laughter — delighted, wild. It sent a cold shiver down Regulus’s spine. “Yes,” she hissed. “Chaos. Oh, isn’t it *beautiful*?”

Regulus felt Rabastan stiffen beside him.

“And more importantly,” Lucius added, “we secured our target.”

That was the moment that Rabastan was apparently unable to stay silent. “Why was she so important?” he asked. “What did she need saving for?”

It was a bold move. They were hardly important enough to be given full answers. But wel, it it had been his friend that had died there… If it had been Isa… Regulus would have asked too. Would have

demanded too, to know who the woman was that had cost Isa her life. The woman who had looked so strangely familiar…

The Dark Lord tilted his head slightly. A slow smile touched his lips.

“Ah, yes. An excellent question, Rabastan. You are right to ask.”

Regulus leaned forward, heart beginning to thud. He hadn’t realised how curious he was until now.

“She is a key piece,” the Dark Lord said, “in a puzzle we’ve been assembling for a very long time. When Thorne fell, we lost more than just a spy. We lost access. *Proximity* .”

The name hit like a blow to Regulus’s chest, but he forced it down. Now was not the time to think about the Mentor he had killed and all the knowledge Regulus had of the man’s position in Dumbledore’s circle. Knowledge he was probably supposed to share with the Dark Lord.

“But now,” the Dark Lord continued, mercifully distracting Regulus, “we have something better. She is not just a spy. She is *the* spy. The only one who can go where no one else can. Reach who no one else can.”

A long, taut silence followed.

“Dumbledore,” the Dark Lord said softly, “is not yet ours. His power is still too great. But we do not need him — not yet. We can take the next ranks instead.”

Regulus blinked. *What*?

The next ranks?

The Dark Lord turned slowly toward him now, expression gleaming with something between pride and cruelty.

“And so — the woman freed from Hohenhain, thanks to your exceptional efforts — with special mention to Regulus…”

More applause, Regulus barely heard it, too curious about where this was going. He was literally at the edge of his seat.

“She is,” the Dark Lord said, voice low and triumphant, “the twin sister of Euphemia Potter’s dearest friend.”

Regulus’s stomach dropped out. The world tipped sideways.

Bellatrix let out another wild laugh — high, ecstatic, deranged.

“Oh yes,” she purred. “She’s in. She’s the only one who can get to them.”

Regulus couldn’t move. He couldn’t speak. He couldn’t *breathe*.

A buzzing filled his ears. The room dissolved around him.

“And she,” the Dark Lord finished with, voice like ice “—she will be the one to take the Potters out.”

Chapter End Notes

> Aaah things are happeningggggg. I'm so excited about your thoughts. Can't believe it's only a couple of chapters before we're wrapping up this book..

Chapter 22: Of Animals & Farms

Chapter Notes

> Thanks you so much, everyone of you, for the kudos and comments. They made my day, as always! ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And she — she will be the one to take the Potters out.

Regulus mustered every scrap of control and restraint he had. He reached for it in the marrow of his bones, clawed it from the furthest corners of his soul, gathered it like splinters from the sharp edges of his DNA. It took everything in him to keep his face still, his expression composed, while inside his chest something splintered open.

They were going to kill the Potters.

They were going to kill James's parents.

Another fresh, terrifying thought struck him like ice down the spine—

Were they going to kill James too?

Regulus quickly realised it didn't even matter — what was the difference, really? Kill Mr. and Mrs. Potter, and they wouldn't even have to touch James. The killing of his parents would destroy all the goodness, the brightness, the righteousness and the defiant hope that was James Potter. It would pulverise the pillars — the very building stones — of the boy Regulus had fallen in love with.

He might as well watch him die.

He thought, sharply, of the lies he had told. He thought of the man who had taught him silence, who had taught him shame.

Yes, I slept well, Mother. No, I haven't seen him. I think he's still waking in his room.

And he thought of the intricate web of lies he had spun around his life with James. The sneaking. The too-short glances in the corridors. The frantic touches and whispered declarations in the depth of night, hidden from the harsh light of the world.

And he thought about the lies he told himself.

I could never live that life — and that's alright.

I will find someone else to love.

This is the path I have to walk, and I'll choose it again every day. Walk, walk, walk. Straight on, without looking back.

He had been lying to everyone — and to himself — his entire life. And now, he needed those lies like oxygen. Needed them to convince himself that if he could lie about everything else, he could keep pretending long enough to survive the rest of this meeting without tearing his skin off.

Just another thirty minutes or so, and he would've made it through.

Bellatrix's voice cut through the fog — sharp and gleeful.

"*Oh*, I've been waiting for this. Finally, we'll rid ourselves of that sanctimonious scum."

Rabastan sounded vaguely surprised. "The Potters? I thought they were too well-guarded."

Lucius's voice was smooth and businesslike. "Which is why it matters. They're the heart of the modernist resistance — they've connections all over the world, they're wealthy, and they've been sponsoring the modernist agenda for years. Their fall will tip the scales. Drastically."

"But they've got heavy protection," Mr. Rosier chimed in. "Old magic, blood wards, all of it."

"Yes," the Dark Lord confirmed, with a smile in his voice. "They are well-defended. Almost impossible to reach." A pause. "*Almost.*"

Lucius nodded. "We've used the prison break as a smokescreen. Officially, we broke Rodolphus and Cletus out — only for the spy to slip away in the chaos, too."

"The spy," the Dark Lord continued, "has reintegrated seamlessly into the modernist ranks. Her position is secure. She is expected at Euphemia Potter's birthday dinner this Friday."

And that's when it hit Regulus.

That's why the spy had seemed so familiar. Two women laughing on a

summer's day, arm slung around each other… The spy's twin sister — Euphemia Potter's best friend. The Healer James had mentioned on several occasions. The Healer who had taken care of Sirius after the ordeal with Mother…

"She'll poison them," Lucius said. "Clean, quick. No direct trail back to her — or us."

Bellatrix let out a low, delighted laugh that made Regulus's throat run dry.

"I've always liked Fridays."

Regulus didn't move, didn't blink, didn't breathe too deeply. Just stared ahead with that same undetached, composed expression, as if it meant nothing. As if talking about killing James's parents didn't make his blood run cold.

Even as the meeting dispersed, he didn't falter. Like usual, he exchanged a few words with Lucius and Mr. Nott and took a drink from Rabastan. When he'd carefully finished it — not too fast, not too slow — he walked to the fireplace. Again, not too fast, because fast meant panic, fast meant guilt.

It wasn't until he was back at Hogwarts — in the Charms classroom on the third floor — that he allowed the mask to slip.

He closed the door behind him, leaned back against the wood, head tipping until it hit the door with a soft *thud*.

And then he cracked.

The shaking came first — quiet, uncontrollable. Then came the ragged breaths. He slid down until he was sitting on the cold stone floor, knees pulled tight to his chest, one hand pressed hard over his mouth to muffle the sound.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

His mind was blank and screaming all at once. His heart had stopped — and was thundering with the rhythm of terror at the same time.

What now?

*****

Regulus somehow managed to make his way back to his dorm without raising too much suspicion. He knew he looked worn out and troubled, but he could school his features well enough to fool most of his friends. He knew, though, that if he'd run into James now, it would be catastrophic — so he was profoundly relieved he didn't encounter him on the way to the dungeons.

He also knew it would be far harder to hide from Isa. Her eyes were trained. She could see through most of his strongest masks, and him leaving Hogwarts always sent her into a state of paranoia and worry. Not that she was wrong, of course — she'd long since realised that Regulus's absences meant bad news.

So, yes — he knew Isa's eyes pierced right through his mask and into the panic, but he was too far gone to really care. His mind was racing, his thoughts and feelings trapped in a whirlpool of fright.

He felt trapped. Trapped in every sense of the word, in every way possible.

It had become the story of his life by now, honestly — a symphony of confinement.

Caged for years by the hands and treason of his governor. Imprisoned by his legacy, the duties and obligations of generations on his shoulders, pressing him all the way down into the very sphere of Tartarus.

He had no idea what to think, what to do, how to make sense of everything at all.

He was a Revolutionary. He was a traditionalist. He was one of the first twelve. One of the Disciples. And he felt honoured. Honoured to be trusted with this — trusted, at this age already, with the responsibilities of the world and the course of history. Because that was what they were doing, that was what they were writing — *history*.

A new course. A new future. A better tomorrow.

But what was this feeling? This thing gnawing at his soul, eating at his consciousness?

Was this what disillusionment felt like?

Because, yes, he *did* feel disappointed. The list was endless. All his life, he had been disappointed by the people who mattered most. Mother, Father, the Governor, Sirius… The only people who could possibly still crush him but hadn't, were Isa and James.

And now this… They were going to kill James's parents.

Somewhere deep down, Regulus understood the strategic necessity — the political rationale for taking them out.

The nausea rose in him immediately, violently. He felt appalled, repulsed by himself for even daring to rationalise the deaths of James's parents — the two most important people in James's life.

And so Regulus drifted — between rationality and conscience, swinging from *I understand* to *I abhor* and everything he came across along the way.

No one had looked remotely reluctant to the plan — of course they hadn't. They did not have any sympathy for the Potters, didn't have any relationship with them at all. For them, killing the Potter patriarch and matriarch was just another simple set in the play of war.

And, honestly, Regulus could hardly expect them to mourn the Potters when they hadn't even shown grief for their own. The only one who'd expressed any emotion at the deaths of two from their inner circle — from the original twelve, even — had been Rabastan, who had lost his best friend. No one seemed to care that Rabastan had lost a friend, or that the Carrow twins had lost their father.

So, no — it shouldn't have been surprising that no one cared about the Potters.

But Regulus did.

He could not let it happen. Fuck political strategy, *damned* with the war.

This was James's parents. This was *James*.

He could not let it happen. He could not do nothing.

But no one could know.

It had been bad enough, back then — the idea of taking Davies from

Mr. Nott. But taking the Potters from the Revolution as a whole? The consequences would be unthinkable. What they'd do to him, if they found out…

Even a flicker of sympathy for the Potters would be enough to damn him. If they ever found out about him and James, he'd probably be killed. But if they found out he'd sabotaged the Dark Lord's plans — no, that was something else entirely.

That would be execution. That would be a warning for the eternity of the wizarding world. That would be spectacle.

The other side couldn't know either. How was he to explain that he knew of the most secret plans? How was he to explain his access to the highest ranks of the Revolution?

For all James and Sirius knew, he wasn't even part of it yet. To them, he was still innocent, still unbranded. Their world would shatter — would stop spinning and collapse all at once — if they knew about the Mark. If they knew about the missions, if they knew about him killing people.

Because he had killed, hadn't he?

So he was a murderer.

The realisation hit him — mercilessly and violently.

He had never thought about it that way. Had never put it into words like that. But yes — he had killed. A total of five people he had killed with his own wand.

Demir. Thorne. Two Aurors in France. A guard in Hohenhain.

He hadn't enjoyed a single one. Hadn't wanted to kill any of them. But he'd had to.

Demir — for the Mark. And for making him pay. Pay for all the terrors he had inflicted on the children, like the governor had inflicted on him.

Thorne — out of mercy. It if hadn't been him, he'd have fallen into the hands of Bellatrix. And well, that was a fate worse than any circle of hell.

And the Aurors, the guard — that had been self-defence.

So, there had been reasons. Regulus knew why he'd had to do it. Regulus could rationalise it. But it didn't change the title — it didn't change the fact. The fact that Regulus was a murderer.

Justified or unjustified — murder was murder, and killing someone made you a killer.

Would James still love him? Would he still love him if he knew he was a murderer?

Perhaps he could go to Dumbledore. Dumbledore knew about his affiliations anyway. He could make him swear to secrecy… And yet… yet something made it impossible.

Going to Dumbledore didn't just entail sabotaging a plan — it meant sabotaging everything. It basically meant switching sides.

And although the meeting had left an utterly sour taste in his mouth, it didn't mean he aligned with Dumbledore. Didn't mean he was with the Modernists.

So, there was only one way forward. He would have to fool the Dark Lord and the Revolutionaries — just as he would fool the Potters and the Modernists.

*****

Regulus spent days racking his head for a way to warn the Potters — to tell them about the spy in their inner circle and their impending death.

Everything else passed him by in a blur. Classes, conversations, mealtimes — he joined on autopilot, nodded when expected, scribbled something during classes, but none of it registered. At night, he lay awake, thinking, plotting, strategising — but nothing ever stuck. He couldn't sleep. And he didn't dare take a potion either, because it would dull his mind and right now — right now his mind was the only thing he had left. The only thing that might save them.

There had to be a way. There *had* to be a way to do this.

He even went to the library, but it was hopeless. He didn't even know where to begin. And well, there wasn't exactly an aisle labelled *How to cock up the Dark Lord's plans without either side finding out.*

By Monday — five days before Mrs. Potter's birthday — the stress had

become suffocating. It wrapped around him like a tangible thing, heavy and paralysing. He didn't say a single word during Potions, and it was only when Isa cornered him in an abandoned classroom and shoved him inside at wandpoint that he finally spoke at all. Not that he said anything worth hearing — only vague reassurances and hollow lies which Isa, rightfully, didn't believe in the slightest.

On Tuesday, after another night of tossing and turning and chasing thoughts that led nowhere, the stress evolved into something worse — full-blown panic. There *was* no way. Not without someone finding out. Even telling them anonymously meant the modernists finding out there was a traitor at the side of the Revolutionaries. And they'd know it was him immediately. There was, after all, only one person on the Revolution's side thay had a reason to go to such lengths for the Potters. This meant that informing them unanimously or marching over to the Potters and telling them directly would be all the same.

There simply was no way.

Not even Quidditch practice could clear his thoughts. Two miserable hours on the pitch only drained what little energy he had left, and he knew he wouldn't be getting it back — not as long as he couldn't bloody sleep.

So on Wednesday morning, when the panic had morphed into hysteria, he forced himself to sit down and think. To rationalise. He grabbed a roll of parchment and a quill and began listing things out, trying to bring order to the chaos, to clear his mind.

And it was then that he realised — it didn't matter.

The outcome would be the same, either way.

Doing nothing, saying nothing — that meant the Potters would die. And it would wreck both James and Regulus. It would destroy James. Regulus knew that James could eventually come to terms with natural causes. But *poisoned* — by the twin sister of his mother's best friend, one of the only people trusted enough to even get that close — no. James would never recover from that, not really. And destroying James meant destroying Regulus. On top of that, knowing that he could've done something… knowing that it had been partially on him — that would just ruin Regulus all over again.

But telling them — telling *James* — would destroy them both as well. Because James would know. He'd know what Regulus was. What he'd done. And what he had been as they had been together… The reality

of James hating him, loathing him, despising him and seeing all these things plain on James's face would destroy Regulus in turn, too.

But James would have his parents.

In both scenarios, James and Regulus would be shattered. But only in one did James still have a family to return to.

And so, on Wednesday evening, a strange calm settled over Regulus — something quiet and steady, in stark contrast to the chaos of the previous days. He'd give himself one more day. Just one more, to be sure. But if — and most likely, *when* — he found no other way…

Then he would tell them.

It was, rationally, the best choice. And nothing beat ratio.

*****

It was in this strange, absurd state of calmness and resignation that Regulus found himself studying in the old Charms classroom on Wednesday evening.

He couldn't take any more of Isa's worried glances, and he hadn't properly touched a single assignment in days due to all the distractions. He also couldn't bear another minute of Barty's explosive moods — all he longed for was some peace and quiet to work on his homework. He was so desperate, in fact, that he didn't even care Lupin had beaten him to the room. Instead, he slipped into a seat at the other side of the room with a nod and got to work without a word.

In the comfortable silence — broken only by the scratch of quills and the soft rustle of parchment — Regulus managed to work his way through the backlog of homework with surprising speed.

Satisfied, he decided to reward himself with some leisure reading. He retrieved the slim paperback from his bag and opened it to where he'd left off, sinking into the pages instantly. He had been starving for something to read after his mind being otherwise occupied for days. Besides, he knew that if he let his mind wander freely, he would spiral into complete panic and dread once again, and his nervous system could really need some rest.

He was so engrossed in the story that it took far too long for him to notice he was being watched.

Slowly, Regulus let his eyes travel upwards, locking onto Lupin's brown ones.

Regulus raised his brows. "What?"

Lupin didn't even flinch at being caught and instead tilted his head slightly. "Nothing." Then, after a pause, "Is that *Animal Farm*?"

Regulus glanced at the book in his hands. "You've read it?"

Lupin shook his head. "No. Not yet."

Regulus blinked. "You haven't?" He let out a small, surprised snort, recalling how lyrical Marie-Anne had been about the book and its importance in Muggle society. "I was told it's practically required reading in the Muggle world."

Lupin huffed a laugh. "Probably is — at secondary school. I was homeschooled, though. Don't think my teacher would care much for those things anyway."

Regulus was momentarily surprised by the fact that Lupin was homeschooled, until he suddenly realised why. Lupin had been kept away from society because he was a werewolf.

The only advantage of being a halfblood was access to two worlds — Muggle and magical — and Lupin had been denied both.

A strange flutter of pity stirred in Regulus's chest.

"It's a good book," he said after a beat. "It's about animals overthrowing their human farmer to build a more equal society… only for it all to collapse under the pigs, who turn into something even worse. The line between oppressor and oppressed gets… blurry. It's unsettling, really. I'm about three-quarters through, so I don't know how it ends yet."

Lupin gave a thoughtful nod. "That sounds good."

Regulus shifted uncomfortably in his seat, realising he'd just spoiled the entire plot. "Sorry… I guess I've ruined it now if you ever wanted to read it."

But Lupin shook his head, smiling faintly. "Not at all. The joy of a book isn't just in the plot. It's in the way it's told — the phrasing, the rhythm…"

There was a brief silence, and then Regulus, without any real forethought, without knowing what he was doing, blurted out the sentence—

“What’s it like — being a werewolf?”

Lupin looked just as stunned as Regulus felt. For a second, he said nothing.

Regulus had no idea why he hadn’t filtered the question. Yes, he was curious — one didn’t often get the chance to speak with a werewolf and discuss these kinds of things — but it was an oddly… personal thing to ask.

“Err, never mind —”

“No, it’s fine,” Lupin interrupted, to Regulus’s surprise. “I get the curiosity. I doubt you’ve heard anything kind about werewolves. I know Sirius hasn’t.”

Regulus nodded stiffly.

Lupin gave a small sigh. “It’s hard. You’re either hiding it or you’re living with others like you — but being part of society is rare. Most people are afraid of what we are. My parents homeschooled me to keep me safe… but also to keep others safe from me, I guess.”

Regulus nodded again, quiet.

“Dumbledore was the first person to give me a real chance,” Lupin continued. “He made arrangements, accepted me when no one else would.”

“You transform in the Shrieking Shack, right?” Regulus asked.

Lupin tilted his head, eyes narrowing slightly. “You’ve really discussed this with James, haven’t you?”

Regulus tensed instantly at the mention of James by one of his friends, but forced himself to stay composed. Bloody Lupin knew too much anyway.

“He didn’t tell me you were a werewolf,” Regulus said, feeling the need to defend James. “Didn’t tell me much at all. I… guessed. He mentioned the Shrieking Shack, though.”

Lupin nodded slowly.

“Is it painful?” Regulus continued, his voice low.

Lupin blinked at him. The question seemed to surprise him.

“Yes,” he said at last, softly. “It’s… awful. Your bones break. Your skin tears. And it’s not just the physical part. You’re not — well, you’re not human anymore. And the scars…” He trailed off for a moment. “That’s how they figured it out, you know.”

Regulus’s eyes flicked briefly to the large scar at Lupin’s jaw. A sharp stab of sympathy hit him as he realised the marks must have been self-inflicted — that Lupin had clawed at himself in desperation, locked away in the Shack…

It made sense. His dorm mates would have wondered why Lupin was constantly injured — new scars every month. If they were close, and Regulus knew they had been from the first minute, they were bound to figure it out quickly.

“How did they react?” Regulus asked.

He didn’t know Pettigrew well enough to imagine how he might’ve taken it. Sirius, either — not really. Surely he would’ve been shocked at least. They’d grown up hearing the most horrific stories about halfbreeds — their mother always saving her most creative insults for them.

But James…

Regulus was certain that James would have accepted it without hesitation. Wouldn’t have blinked at the dangers. Wouldn’t have cared that his friend turned out to be a werewolf. No — James would have felt nothing but loyalty and empathy.

Because James was like that. His heart was pure gold.

Lupin looked down at his hands, then gave a small, incredulous smile. “Better than I ever expected. I’d been told my whole life that wizards saw us as filth — monsters. But they… didn’t flinch. They accepted me. Protected me and treated me like I was just… normal.”

Regulus said nothing for a moment, his face unreadable.

“They’re rare, though,” Lupin added quietly. “I’m lucky. Not everyone gets that. I might be the luckiest werewolf alive.”

Regulus nodded. “Yes — in traditional circles… werewolves aren’t just feared. They’re, you know, considered unnatural.” He paused, suddenly feeling very awkward at discussing this with a werewolf. “But not just werewolves. The same goes for anything not strictly witch or wizard. House Elves, for example.”

He thought of Whiskerley and Kreacher, of the things they could do — things even adult witches and wizards couldn’t.

“And that while they’re magical,” Regulus continued, “and have powers we don’t.”

Lupin looked, again, surprised at Regulus’s words and took a brief moment to compose himself. “Yes, but they’re bound by their masters, so that already makes it an unequal relationship.”

Regulus nodded slowly. “Yes, that’s true.”

House Elves were under their masters’ command — bound by strict magical contracts, answering only to others with explicit permission. Even communication between House Elves was restricted unless the master allowed it. The only time something could override that was if one Elf shared information with another under instruction to keep it secret from their own master.

So, if Sable — Isa’s House Elf — had heard something from Whiskerley, he couldn’t report it to the Notts if Whiskerley had ordered secrecy. Not even if Sable’s masters demanded it.

It made sense. Otherwise, House Elves could share all their masters’ secrets with each other — and pass them on. It would be chaos. It could, without a doubt, even lead to war.

Regulus had never fully understood why wizards looked down on House Elves. Yes, they were servants, but there was no reason to treat them cruelly. They were magically bound to obey — it wasn’t as if they needed to be threatened. People also forgot that House Elves had access to a type of magic that far surpassed the human variety. They could Apparate in and out of Hogwarts, for one — Whiskerley had managed to Apparate into Bellatrix’s basement. If not for Whiskerley, Davies would’ve died.

And then, suddenly, like lightning striking—

It clicked.

Regulus's breath caught.

House Elves.

Magic beyond human capability.

Oathbinding wards.

They could share information among themselves without implicating their masters. Whiskerley could pass something on to the Potters' Elf — and the Elf could claim to have stumbled upon it by accident. The poison could be discovered… by coincidence.

That was it.

He had found it.

The answer. The solution. The *Holy Grail*.

Regulus shot to his feet, startling Lupin.

"I have to go," he said breathlessly, already grabbing his bag. The world had gone blurry in a rush of adrenaline, and if Lupin responded at all, it passed him by.

Without waiting, he bolted from the room, heart pounding, thoughts racing, already halfway to the seventh floor.

He needed Whiskerley.

Now.

*****

The following days passed in a torturous mix of doubt, fear and fragile hope. Regulus had given Whiskerley very specific instructions, but there were so many unknowns. What if the spy struck before Mrs. Potter's birthday? What if the Potters' elf made a mess of it? What if someone, somehow, realised the elf had been warned?

There were too many variables, so many things that could go wrong…

He hated that he had no control — no details, no updates, not even the faintest idea of what was happening.

Every mealtime, every corridor crossing, Regulus found his gaze drawn to James with a disturbing intensity. He repeated to himself,

over and over, that he'd done all he could. That it was out of his hands now. That it was up to Whiskerley — up to fate, up to greater powers now.

He'd been dealt certain cards, and he'd played accordingly.

He repeated this mantra so often that it managed to keep his anxiety bearable through Thursday and most of Friday, but as dinner rolled around on Mrs. Potter's birthday, the panic clawing at his chest was unbearable.

He couldn't eat. His stomach had folded in on itself, tight with dread. He took a single sip of pumpkin juice and forced himself to breathe.

What time did dinner parties usually begin? What time would they toast to Mrs. Potter's life? When would the spy strike — at the start? Or would she wait until pudding?

His eyes snapped to the doors of the Great Hall as James entered with Sirius, Lupin, and Pettigrew.

His hair was as perfectly tousled as ever, falling in just the right messy sweep over his brow. His tie was half-askew in a way that would send Mother into a frenzy but somehow suited James completely. He laughed easily at something Sirius had said, eyes bright behind his glasses, his shoulders relaxed, hands tucked casually into his pockets — entirely himself. Effortless, charming. Not strange, not worried, not suspicious or grieving.

But it was still early…

No — if the spy had acted tonight, James wouldn't know yet. Perhaps McGonagall would pull him aside after dinner. Perhaps he'd hear once he was back in the common room. Or tomorrow morning…

Regulus's gaze flicked up to the staff table.

Dumbledore was absent again. Valaine wasn't present either. It was like that most of the days.

"For fuck's sake, what's up with you?" Barty shot. "You're so bloody tense these days."

Regulus stiffened, feeling caught, then snapped, "*I'm* tense, am I? I'm not the one hexing students every time I walk down a corridor."

It was a low blow and he knew it. Barty was still going through it with Warrington having broken up with him, but well — he really wanted to deflect from his apparently obvious stress. He needed them off his back.

Isa gave him a cool, unimpressed look.

Regulus couldn't blame her. He was jumpy, irritable, constantly scanning the Gryffindor table, constantly looking for James in the corridors, hoping to find answers on his face. He couldn't ask Whiskerley — he had only informed the Potters' elf; there was no way he knew what had happened afterwards.

So it wasn't surprising his friends were wondering what the hell was wrong with him.

And it didn't stop. When James didn't appear at breakfast on Saturday morning, Regulus all but lost it. His nerves shot through. His heart thrummed in his chest widely, his vision was swimming.

It had happened. His plan had failed.

The Potters were dead.

Fuck. The Potters were dead. James's parents were… *dead*.

Regulus needed to see him. Needed to talk to him, to see how he was doing.

But surely he had left the castle already — flooed home to Potter Manor. Would his friends have gone with him? Sirius wouldn't have let him face it alone. Maybe Lupin was still at Hogwarts — Lupin might have answers. Lupin *would* have answers.

Regulus was minutes away from storming up to Gryffindor Tower when he turned a corner and nearly collided with James and Sirius, fresh from Quidditch practice — brooms in hand, wind-tousled, still in uniform, cheeks flushed from the cold.

They were laughing.

They were fine.

His heart dropped — not with dread this time, but with sheer, bone-deep relief. He took a deep breath and the tight, repressing coil of panic seemed to exit him with it.

The Potters were alive.

Every day for the rest of that week followed a similar rhythm. Waiting, watching, panicking. At every meal, every chance he got, Regulus studied James for signs — anything. A crack, a shadow, some hint that something had gone wrong, some hint that something had happened. But nothing came.

And as the days passed, slowly and unevenly, the panic began to ease. The fear began to ebb.

And eventually, Regulus had to accept the truth. Eventually, Regulus could more or less breathe again.

Because apparently it had worked.

The Potters lived.

*****

Regulus had no meetings, no missions in the weeks leading up to the Easter holidays.

Normally he would have been elated by it — especially now that missions apparently included things like breaking into Swiss prisons — but now, in a strange turn of events, it made him uneasy. Because no meetings meant no new information about the Potters, no word on what had happened with the spy. Yes, he knew that the plan must've failed, as James sat at every meal as his usual self, but it made him uneasy that he didn't know any details and didn't know what might come next.

And he could hardly ask. Cissy was the only one Regulus communicated with via owl, and that was always in code and never covered anything beyond what was strictly necessary. No, the only way to find out anything without raising suspicion was if they'd cover it during a meeting.

Still, Regulus made the best of it and tried to enjoy the uncharacteristic calm. He focused on his classes, dutifully worked on the Felix Felicis with Evans when they had to, attended the Potions class on Mondays while trying to ignore the presence of Sirius and James at the same table, and he had managed to completely decimate Hufflepuff in the match the last weekend before the holidays.

All in all, life was treating him considerably well.

But he knew. He knew that these moments of calms were only intermezzos in a piece of tragedy — brief rests between movements of some horrible symphony. After all, Easter was around the corner, and it had become a trend. His nervous system had learned the rhythm of the year; the holidays were cursed. Two years ago, it was Cissy's wedding. Last year, it was Bellatrix probing his mind.

So yes, he knew. He could feel it — that familiar tightness in his chest, his nerves coiling in preparation. Something was coming.

And *boy*, was it coming.

Boy, would the events over Easter turn his world upside down, mark the beginning of the end, change the entire course of history…

Though he'd never have guessed it would start here — over toast and eggs and a second-year giggling about chocolate bunnies.

He was sitting beside Miller at the Slytherin table. Regulus felt tired from another night of poor sleep, so he was glad that Miller managed to energise him with her usual excitement and optimism. Regulus's usual group sat further down the table, shooting glances at the sight of Miller and Regulus every once in a while. egulus tried not to be annoyed by Barty's amused look or the confused ones from the rest, thinking that after all this time, they should've been used to the friendship between him and his Chaser.

So, he tried to tune it all out and just enjoy his time with Miller. He was glad that her two awkward friends had taken seats further down when they had spotted Regulus and Miller together, discussing the weird Muggle tradition of hiding Easter eggs in the garden.

"…so, basically, it's pure chaos," Miller concluded with a knowing nod.

Regulus smirked. "Well, at least you get a decent haul of chocolate out of it."

Miller laughed and was about to retort something when Professor Slughorn appeared beside them, clipboard in hand.

"Ah, Mr. Black, Miss Miller!" Slughorn beamed, rotund and red-cheeked. "Both of you heading home for the holidays, I take it?"

Regulus nodded politely. "Yes, Professor." He glanced at Miller who looked a bit shy under her Head of House's attention. "Miller as well."

Miller gave a small nod.

“Excellent, excellent. I do hope your dear mother is feeling better, my boy,” Slughorn said, lowering his voice with a touch of sympathy. “You’ve been performing marvelously in class despite it all — truly admirable.”

Regulus pushed down the feeling of his stomach twisting. He forced a smile, feeling that sucking up to the Professor would be the most effective way to steer the conversation away from his supposedly ill mother. “Well, I do enjoy my classes, sir. Potions in particular, of course.”

Slughorn positively beamed. “And not just that, also the Captaincy! What an *excellent* match against Hufflepuff last weekend!” He looked pointedly at Miller too, who turned a fierce shade of scarlet.

“And of course, your little library project,” Slughorn added with a wink.

Regulus stilled. *What?*

“What?” he asked, too sharply.

Slughorn chuckled. “Oh, Miss Miller’s earned your trust, hasn’t she? Surely you can tell her about your project.”

“My — sorry, what project?”

Before Slughorn could respond, Professor McGonagall called down the table, waving a parchment.

“Horace, are you quite finished? I need those names.”

“Coming, my dear Minerva!” Slughorn called back, then winked again. “Good holidays, Regulus, Charlotte.”

And with that, he bustled away.

Regulus sat frozen, heart starting to hammer. *Library project.* There was no library project. He had no memory of starting one — not this year, not ever — and certainly no recollection of telling Slughorn about it.

Miller snorted. “I’ve never seen you look this baffled.”

“What the hell was he talking about?”

She shrugged, clearly amused. “If it’s meant to be a secret, you don’t have to be *so* dramatic, Cap.”

“No, I’m serious. I’ve got no idea what he meant.”

Miller tilted her head at him with a smirk. “Wow, looks like someone’s had a run-in with a rogue Obliviator.”

Regulus’s spine snapped straight.

“What did you say?”

“I — oh, is that not how you say it?” she asked quickly, flustered. “I’m still getting used to the magical sayings. They’re a bit different from the Muggle ones.”

Regulus didn’t answer.

His mind had gone blank.

No — not blank. Blazing. *A rogue Obliviator*.

Then, suddenly, Mr. Nott’s voice came back to him like a ghost —his response when Regulus had asked whether the Hohenhain guard would ever know he’d been Obliviated.

He’ll have the occasional odd sensation, perhaps some strange gaps in memory. But he has no reason to believe he’s been Obliviated. Even if he were to piece things together, he’d need something far more difficult than simple magic to get his memories back.

Regulus’s breath hitched.

Odd sensations. Like walking into rooms and forgetting why, like the feeling of having lost a key you never remembered owning. Like that time he’d forgotten borrowing those books Madam Leaf wanted him to return to the library.

Library project.

It wasn’t a solid theory… It wasn’t *proof*. Slughorn could’ve misunderstood something. He could be overworked, stressed, losing track…

And yet.

Yet, he knew. Deep in his gut, the same place that had always

whispered truths when lies grew too loud, he knew….

The only question was: *by whom?*

And, perhaps more terrifying still—

Why?

Chapter End Notes

> Things are happening, people... and Reg will get there, really, in just a little bit ;) but probably not like you'd expect it to... So much is yet to happen, can't wait to share it with you.
>
> Can't wait either to hear what you guys think! And as always, lots of love x

Chapter 23: Of Invitations & Requests

Chapter Notes

A long chapter (8k+) for the weekend!

I want to thank everyone of you for the kudos/comments on and engagement with this story, I'm so thrilled to see that people are enjoying it and are taking their time to share their excitement with me. It's sooo appreciated and it makes my day every single time. (I'll be responding to comments in a bit, but it was either that or posting the chapter, so...)

Mind the warnings for this chapter.

❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus boarded the Hogwarts Express more distracted than he'd been in weeks. His friends didn't seem to notice anything out of the ordinary. This wasn't particularly surprising — less than three months had passed since the Christmas holidays, and between the Hohenhain break, the attempted poisoning of the Potters and the endless tension between himself, Sirius, James, and Isa, they'd grown used to him drifting in and out of focus.

Not that he didn't try. Even now, sitting in a compartment with Barty, Evan, Mulciber and Avery, he did his best to keep up with the banter, to laugh at the right moments, to pretend everything was fine.

The girls had claimed their own compartment — likely wanting to avoid Barty, who'd been in an extraordinarily foul mood all week — and with Severus staying behind at Hogwarts, it left just the five of them. It was an easy ride, with Regulus starting a new Camus and half-listening to the conversation, chiming in only when directly addressed or when he felt that Barty's temper needed some softening.

"So, you're off to Germany, Crouch?" Avery asked, picking at some garish, crackling snack.

Regulus felt Barty stiffen beside him and prepared to step in, to steer the conversation elsewhere, but to Regulus's surprise, Barty held

himself together.

“Yeah,” he replied curtly — though the sharpness in his tone didn’t go unnoticed.

“And you’re going back to Black Manor?” Mulciber turned to Regulus.

He looked up from his book and nodded. “Yes, heading straight there.”

“Alone?” Avery pressed.

Regulus raised a brow. This was logical. “Yes.”

“Nott not joining you?”

He blinked. “No. Why would she?”

A brief silence followed.

“Well,” Evan offered, clearly stepping into the role of spokesman for the group’s unspoken thought, “she does spend most of her holidays at yours, mate.”

Regulus considered this.

Alright, fair point. Since fifth year, Isa had indeed spent large parts of the holidays at Black Manor. He could sense where this was heading — the tiresome topic of him and Isa — and was determined to derail it. Not that he could blame them with everything that had been going on between him and her — but he had a difficult time making sense of it himself, so he could hardly decipher it with others.

They were friends. They had slept together, more than once. It had been… incredible. They were also both in love with other people — people they could never, ever be with. And they were expected to marry each other someday.

How was anyone supposed to make sense of that?

“She’s at her family estate in Manchester,” he offered, his tone final enough to signal a change in subject.

*****

All Regulus could think about on the ride to King’s Cross and the first weekend at Black Manor was the possible revelation — or well, he

was sure it wasn't as much as a possible revelation as an indisputable fact.

He'd felt it for months now — that unease gnawing at him — but hadn't been able to place it. He'd chalked it up to stress, to sleep deprivation. Besides, he'd hardly had the time to dwell on it, because the year had been brutal. Classes, captaincy, missions — every hour of his life had been accounted for. So no, he didn't blame himself for not seeing it sooner. If anything, he ought to be grateful he'd noticed at all.

If he indeed had been Obliviated — and he was now convinced he was — he should have never found out. Should have lived through the unease until it wore off, turning into nothing but a phantom feeling in the outer depths of his being. The only reason the feeling had been so prominent, at least prominent enough to notice, was the fact that his mind had been so thoroughly trained. With all his training in Occlumency, his mind was stronger than most adults'. And he had been bizarrely lucky too, that Miller had used *that* phrasing, had used *those* words where she could have used so many others, which had sent something inside him snapping into place.

And now he was left with the questions. So many questions, every single one of them eating him alive.

Why? Why had he been Obliviated? What had he seen, what had he done that needed to be scrubbed from his mind?

And by *whom*? There were several possibilities. It could have been Mother. She was skilled with that kind of magic — the one altering the mind — after all. But why? He hardly spent any time with her or around her, so what could have possibly happened that had to be erased from his memory? It could have been Lucius, or Mr. Nott… In that case, it would be Revolution related. He could not think of another context in which they would Obliviate him. Perhaps he'd seen or overheard something he wasn't meant to. But then again, he already knew so much. Hadn't he proved his loyalty already? Didn't they trust him?

There was another person, though. Another person very skilled at this kind of magic and never one to pass the opportunity to meddle with his mind, to play with his thoughts just for the mere thrill of it.

Bellatrix.

Yes, he had concluded quickly that of all the options, of all the people,

it had been her. Just another part in another one of her sick, twisted mind games.

But *why*? What had happened? What had he done? What had she taken?

The not-knowing was unbearable. Even mundane tasks — making coffee, getting dressed, forcing himself to write a few lines of an essay — were haunted by that sudden, jarring rush of dread. The spiral would hit all over again. *Why? Who? How? What for?*

He was aware that it was driving him mad. He was positive that if this continued, he would probably, actually, turn insane. And he needed his mind more than ever, needed to be mentally strong. He needed to find out — he could not live with this feeling, this knowledge, that pieces of his life were missing. That someone had tampered with his memory — and that he didn't know who, or why. No, he needed answers.

And there was only one person who might be able to restore it.

Mr. Nott.

Regulus knew he had the skill. If it *had* been Bellatrix, he'd need someone exceptional. There were probably only a handful of people on this continent capable of undoing what she might have done — and Regulus was lucky enough to be close to one of them.

He needed a story, though. An excuse. He could not share his suspicions with Mr. Nott — he could share them with the wrong people. Or Mr. Nott himself could have done it — yes, Regulus was almost completely sure that it had been Bellatrix, but he could still be wrong. In both cases, Regulus needed a story, an excuse, a cover.

And then somehow, the opportunity presented itself, and — in a bizarre turn of events — it started with an invitation by Mr. and Mrs. Nott for dinner on Thursday evening.

If he was right, it was not just any invitation. And if he was right, the perfect opportunity had just presented itself.

He'd need time to prepare. To make the story watertight. But he could make it work. He *would*.

First, though — he needed to confirm his suspicions.

He needed to speak with Cissy.

*****

On Sunday evening, just a few hours after having received the invitation, Regulus stepped out of the fireplace at Cissy and Lucius's. Now, of course Cissy was like a sister to him and he had made sure to drop by at an appropriate time — after supper, during tea — but he still felt a bit uncomfortable flooing in unannounced. There was no alternative, though, for Thursday was approaching fast and there'd be barely any time to prepare if he didn't get the facts straight as soon as possible. So, he truly hoped he wasn't intruding, and called for the House Elf — Dobby — to announce his presence.

Moments later, Cissy came rushing into the entrance hall, looking a mixture of pleased, surprised and faintly concerned at the sight of her cousin.

She greeted him with a quick kiss on the cheek, told Dobby to take his cloak, and ushered him toward the morning room.

"You alright?" she asked as they walked. "You don't usually show up like this — not that I don't want you to, you know you're always welcome — just… well."

"I'm alright," Regulus said quickly. "I just needed to check something with you."

The scent of after-supper tea lingered as they entered the morning room. Seated at the table, mid-conversation, were Lucius and Yaxley.

Regulus offered polite greetings, lingering uncertainly in the doorway.

"Everything alright, Regulus?" Lucius asked, with a mild frown.

Regulus nodded noncommittally. He truly didn't want to have this conversation with anyone else than Cissy, though. Lucius would be tolerable if there was no other way, but Yaxley…

"I'm fine, thanks," Regulus offered. "Just wanted a word with Cissy."

Yaxley's face broke into a crooked smirk, but Lucius immediately sensed Regulus's discomfort.

"Well, then," he said, rising to his feet. "Corban, let's see if there's something stronger than tea in the drawing room, shall we?"

Yaxley chuckled lowly and winked at Regulus before following Lucius out.

Cissy gestured for Regulus to sit, pouring him a fresh cup of tea. “Alright, what’s going on?”

He sighed and pulled a folded letter from his pocket, sliding it across the table toward her.

“I got an invitation.”

She read it carefully, then looked up at him. She remained silent.

“Is this what I think it is?” Regulus asked.

She sighed, opened her mouth, closed it again, and then nodded.

“It is.”

Regulus let out a slow breath, leaning back in his chair, head tilted to the ceiling.

So it was happening.

Mr. and Mrs. Nott had invited him to dinner — without Isa. She’d be at Melania’s that evening, as the letter noted. So, this was a private dinner, only him and Isa’s parents. And that could only mean one thing: the negotiations were beginning.

In traditional pure-blood circles, once the initial stages of an arranged marriage had been addressed — which might involve parental introductions, private agreements between the intended couple, or both, depending on the family — the next step was negotiation. Dowries, inheritance terms, marital expectations and prenuptial clauses were all standard points of discussion.

Usually, such matters were handled between the parents. But when the groom held legal standing, possessed significant assets or had an especially close relationship with the bride’s family, he might negotiate directly.

So no — it didn’t surprise Regulus that his own parents weren’t involved. He had legal custodianship over several estates, a personal Gringotts vault flush enough to fund a small country, and he had known the Notts for years. He had in some strange way even grown… close to Mr. Nott, with all their missions together. They had spent

several nights together in Switzerland, had fought side-by-side in France, had been the main players in the biggest prison break in centuries. They had killed together. And well, that forged a bond.

It thus didn't surprise him his parents weren't involved in the negotiation. What did surprise him, though, was the timing. He was still two weeks from coming of age, Isa being a few weeks behind him, and they were already setting things in motion, moving towards formalising the engagement between him and her.

Of course, Regulus had no idea what the preferred schedule was meant to be — but if the Notts wanted to discuss dowries and prenups now, then chances were they intended to have the engagement announced before they'd even graduated from Hogwarts.

"Are you surprised?" Cissy asked, cutting through his thoughts.

He scoffed softly, staring up at the ceiling. "Not surprised, exactly. Just… why now? Why the rush?"

Cissy sighed. "Isa is a very desirable bachelorette, Reg. You know that."

He snorted again.

"Not that you aren't," she added quickly, giving him a meaningful look. "You're the Black heir. You're brilliant, disgustingly composed for your age, and you're also — well — let's face it, extremely handsome."

He gave her a flat look, ignoring the heat rising in his cheeks.

"But Isa is… Isadora," Cissy said with a shrug. "I wouldn't be surprised if Magnus gets a new proposal for her every week. With his network and business ties across continents, he's probably fielding offers constantly. And in your case — well, your Mother keeps most people at bay. Plus, everyone's already accepted you're marrying Isa."

She hesitated, then added, quieter, "And perhaps Magnus wants to make sure she doesn't fall for someone less… suitable."

Regulus's thoughts jolted to Davies.

So Cissy knew. Knew Isa had been at odds with her family's ideology. Maybe she even knew about Davies — at least in part. She must've wondered how a recent Hogwarts graduate had landed on Mr. Nott's

hit list.

She probably assumed Regulus didn't know. Thought that if he *did* know, he'd see it as betrayal. That he'd never go through with marrying Isa.

If Cissy even knew, knew that it had been him who'd saved Davies's life, that it had been him who'd freed him from her sister's basement…

He sighed again, a hand dragging through his hair.

"Are you… unhappy with all this?" Cissy asked gently.

He stirred his tea. "No. We always knew it was coming."

She looked at him for a long moment. Then came the question. The one she'd probably wanted to ask for years.

"Do you love her?"

Regulus froze. He didn't know what to do with this question.

Did it matter? Would it change anything?

They didn't love each other like that, but they were each other's best option. There was literally no other woman alive that Regulus could spend more than a few days with without turning mad. And Isa… well, without Regulus, Isa would be thrown in front of the wolves. Of course she'd marry Regulus — he was her best friend, one of the only men who actually respected her. One of the few who saw her as more than something to lust after.

Did it matter, then, whether it was love?

They were going to get married anyway.

"We're not exactly thrilled about getting married *now*," Regulus muttered, dodging the question.

Cissy gave a knowing hum. "It's a bit early, yes. But don't forget — until about ten years ago, the legal age for marriage was twelve."

Regulus made a face.

She snorted. "I know. Grim."

A beast passed. Then Regulus asked quietly, “What do I do now? What’s expected of me?”

Cissy’s expression sharpened — her business face. “Well, if you’re meeting Magnus and Vivienne alone, they’ll want to discuss the dowry and marital terms. So yes — you’ll need to meet with Gregory.”

Gregory Darrow. Of course — the family solicitor.

“And now’s the time to consider what *you* want,” Cissy continued. “What your conditions are. What you’re willing to give, and what Isa should be entitled to.”

“I don’t care about all that,” Regulus muttered. “She can have everything, do whatever she wants.”

Cissy gave him a wry smile. “That’s sweet, Reg, but marriages *can* fall apart. And if they do, you’ll want to have things arranged properly.”

He snorted. “Like divorce exists in our circles.”

She laughed. “Times are changing. It’s rare, but it’s happening. Just… think about it. It’s not just the money. It’s everything — what *you* expect from marriage. What you expect from her. Do you want children? Do you allow her to work, to have a job? How much autonomy do you grant her?”

Regulus let out a deep, suffering sigh.

Cissy’s face turned into a wry smile. “Do you want me to come with you to the Notts?”

Regulus hesitated. Cissy clearly knew more about this stuff than him, had more experience with these things. But he was invited alone, and bringing Cissy would feel… childish.

He’d turn an adult in a couple of weeks. He was the Heir of the House of Black.

He should be able to fend for himself now.

“No, it’s alright,” he said. “But maybe come with me to Darrow. You’ll know what to ask.”

Cissy nodded. “Sure, Reg.”

*****

Regulus let out a deep, shaky breath.

He had survived.

Of course, he had endured things far more dangerous — prison breaks, basement escapes, duels — but there was something uniquely unnerving about a private dinner with your future in-laws.

Future in-laws.

He exhaled again, this one longer, heavier.

He plucked a small twig from the edge of the pond before him and flicked it into the water, watching the ripples distort the reflection of the pale evening sky. Then another twig. Another flick. Another ripple.

And then, quiet. Just the garden around him, the distant chirp of frogs, and the soft lap of water against the pond's edge.

Yes — he had survived. He had been remarkably composed, too — hadn't toppled his wine, hadn't dropped his spoon into the steaming soup, hadn't let a single tic of unease cross his face during the polite conversation — the Revolution, the weather, news from Hogwarts. He had kept it together too when the real reason for the dinner had reared its head. And it had all come up — numbers, estates, rights, expectations, dowries, inheritance terms and prenuptial clauses.

And, somehow, miraculously, Regulus hadn't even flinched when Magnus Alaric Nott had asked — in the same tone he might ask about the stock market — how Regulus planned to propose. This summer.

This summer.

He dropped another twig. Watched it float.

Three months. Less than that, really. Three months until he'd kneel before her. Three months until he'd slide a ring onto her finger. Three months until he'd call her his fiancée.

In the distance, the door to the manor creaked open, spilling warm kitchen light onto the lawn. He didn't turn, but recognised the familiar gait. A rustle of fabric, then Isa settled down beside him, her shoulder brushing his. They both wore their heavy cloaks — it was early April, and the night air was deceptively brutal.

“You had dinner with my parents,” she said softly.

Regulus nodded, eyes still on the water. “Yes.”

“Alone.”

“Yes.”

A beat. Then, “When is it happening?”

He exhaled. “This summer.”

She winced. Her fingers found a piece of grass and began to twist it.

“What did you discuss?” she asked, not quite looking at him.

“Oh, you know. Dowry, inheritance, marital obligations. Turns out you’re insanely expensive, Nott. I’m losing my entire fortune to you.”

Isa gave a soft huff of a laugh. “Well, I’ll have you know I’m priceless.”

Regulus smirked. “Luckily, I’ve got my immeasurable handsomeness to bargain with.”

That made her laugh, genuinely this time. The sound was warm and beautiful.

“So… what happens now?” she asked.

“Well,” Regulus said, brushing his thumb over his knee, “I’m formally meeting your parents again in a few days to settle everything. After I’ve talked with Darrow, the family’s solicitor.”

Isa snorted sarcastically. “Right. Makes sense they’d leave me out of my own marriage negotiations — it’s not like I have preferences or anything.”

Regulus couldn’t suppress a smirk. “They’re probably afraid you’ll cock it up. Can’t risk losing me as a son-in-law.”

She laughed again, leaning into him slightly — but then fell quiet.

Regulus looked at her and saw the tension on her face immediately.

“Is there something, then?” he asked.

She hesitated.

“Tell me,” Regulus pressed.

A silence stretched before she rushed the words out, clearly nervous.

“I want to keep my own name.”

Well — that wasn’t what he had expected. It was legal, technically, for a woman to keep her birth name, but it was a very… unorthodox choice. Wives were meant to fold into their husband’s households, into their names, into their legacies.

But he had to admit — the request suited Isa and her tendency to test boundaries, to push where others yielded. Her parents would *not* be pleased, though.

Then the realisation struck.

“You want me to break this to your parents, don’t you?”

Isa gave him a pleading look.

Regulus groaned dramatically. “Fuck. Do you think your mum will faint?”

Isa burst out laughing, rich and unguarded.

Regulus shook his head, smiling now too. He knew he didn’t stand a chance against her.

“God, I’ll have to bring Uncle Alphard’s most expensive bottle of Firewhiskey just to butter your father up.”

Their laughter faded into comfortable silence. The pond before them was calm now, mirroring the floating lanterns that bobbed gently across its surface.

Then Isa asked, more quietly, “How… is this going to happen? Is it like an announcement or…?”

That had been one of the more interesting parts of the conversation. Regulus knew several people — Mrs. Nott and Cissy among them — would have killed for it to be a grand, public affair. He could have opted for an official notice in the *Daily Prophet* , too — the whole arrangement was unspontaneous enough already — but no.

He'd made sure he could do it differently. For her.

Isa deserved to be romanticised. Deserved a quiet, beautiful moment. Deserved for him to get on one knee, somewhere idyllic and still, and ask her — without an audience — to become his wife.

That had been one of the few non-negotiable things Regulus had insisted on.

"I'm going to ask you," he said. "Just you and me. No Prophet photographers, no audience — just us."

Isa turned to him, and the sheer intensity of her gratitude and understanding made his throat dry.

"How do you feel about this, Reg?" she asked. "Are you… unhappy?"

Regulus looked at her. He looked at her self-conscious, brown eyes. At the way her fingers fidgeted with the edge of her cloak. At the way she angled her face slightly away from him, like she didn't want to be seen if the answer hurt.

And it was so deeply, bitterly unfair.

Unfair that she had to marry him instead of the man she had loved. Unfair that her life was being handed over, decision by decision, at the age of sixteen.

He shifted, draped an arm around her shoulders. Isa leaned in without hesitation, her head settling against him.

"Well," he murmured, "I'm the luckiest man alive, aren't I? I get to marry the smartest, most beautiful woman in the world."

Isa smiled, soft and a little sad.

They sat like that in silence, wrapped in cloaks and quiet.

Just the two of them. Them against the world, like it had always been — and like, apparently, it always would be.

*****

If Regulus had thought the Easter Curse was complete with the news of the engagement and the prospect of having to somehow coax Mr. Nott into restoring his memory — not to mention what that restoration might bring about — he was sorely mistaken.

He'd just wrapped up an exhausting day with Cissy and Mr. Darrow to prepare for the meeting with the Notts in two days. He was leafing through the last batch of documents Mr. Darrow had left when he heard a voice.

But it wasn't just a voice — it was *his name*, shrieked with such raw panic and pain that it made the hairs on his neck rise. It came from the entrance hall, and his mind instantly fumbled to identify the voice — someone familiar, but so distorted by terror he couldn't place it. No, all he registered was the tone — *something was wrong*, catastrophically wrong — and he bolted.

Only a few people had access to his Floo — his closest family members and best friends. No one who should ever be screaming like that. He felt his pulse spike and the hairs on his neck rise.

What he found in the hall knocked the breath from his lungs.

Evan was on his knees, drenched in blood.

It covered his hands, smeared up to his elbows, staining the front of his shirt and soaking the knees of his trousers where he'd crumpled on the stone floor. His usually blond hair was dark with it — crimson, sweaty curls clinging to his face, slick with blood and panic. His lips were trembling, and his eyes — wide and wild — snapped to Regulus the moment he entered.

In his arms lay Barty.

Unconscious, limp, pale.

Blood poured from a gruesome wound in his shoulder, running in sluggish streams down his arm, pooling beneath him and spreading across the polished stone like spilled ink. His head lolled unnaturally to one side. His face was deathly still.

Regulus felt like he'd been hit. Every muscle in his body seized.

It was a terrible, surreal echo of that night — when Regulus had ended up in James's entrance hall, bloodied and trembling in terror, Sirius more dead than alive in his arms and bleeding like Barty was doing now.

And now he understood.

Now he understood why James hadn't moved right away. Because

Regulus couldn't either. He stood frozen, knees locked, throat closed in panic.

Then Evan's voice tore through the fog.

"Reg," he choked. "Reg — you have to help me. I don't— I don't know what to do—"

Regulus didn't move. Couldn't. His limbs felt locked, heart hammering in his throat.

"REG!" Evan screamed, voice cracking in blind panic. "*MOVE — HE'S GOING TO DIE!*"

That did it.

Regulus all but flew onto the floor beside him, wand already out, movements fast and automatic and completely dictated by the adrenaline rushing through his veins.

He hadn't had to use Healing spells in quite some time — ironic, considering he'd found himself in plenty of situations that could've warranted this arsenal of spells lately. But it had either been Cissy or a Healer who'd patched him up after his missions.

No, Healing spells had always been something between him and Sirius — an act of defiance against Mother when one of them had transgressed. Most of the time it had been Sirius. And most of the time, it had been Regulus casting the spells.

Now, with Evan sobbing and Barty bleeding out in front of him, Regulus summoned every spell he could remember.

"Hold him," he ordered, voice low and urgent.

His hands were already tearing Barty's ruined shirt open, the blood-soaked fabric peeling back to reveal the wound: a wide, jagged gash cleaving through the top of his shoulder, down to muscle and sinew. The flesh was torn unevenly, like it had been ripped.

"*Fuck*," he swore, voice rough. "What the fuck happened to him?"

"He Apparated," Evan choked. "He just — he just turned up at mine like this, Reg, he must've Splinched—"

"He's got his license," Regulus snapped. "You both do. He passed!"

“I *know*!”

As the bleeding slowed under the first round of spells, Regulus finally got a proper look at Barty’s body. Bruises littered his torso — deep, blotchy blue and purple across his ribs, as though someone had kicked him. A long, thin cut traced down his side, still crusted with dried blood. There was a welt across his cheekbone, half-hidden under matted hair.

Regulus looked up, meeting Evan’s eyes — eyes red with tears and wild with helplessness. Never in his life had he seen Evan like this. Evan was the easygoing mate — affordable, the personification of carefreeness. Evan was supposed to be the sensible one, the calm one beside his reckless best friend.

But this — this was a version of Evan that Regulus had never seen. There was only fear, rawness and so much panic Regulus could feel it radiating off him.

“Where did he come from?” Regulus asked, voice low, razor-sharp. “Where the fuck was he running from to Splinch himself this badly?”

Evan blinked — once, twice — then spilled.

“His father.”

Regulus stared. His mind staggered at the words.

No way.

“*Mr. Crouch? Mr. Crouch* did this?”

Evan just nodded. He looked barely coherent — the panic, the fear, the heartbreak all slamming together behind his eyes.

“He’s going to be okay, right?” he whispered. “Reg — please — tell me he’s going to be okay—

Regulus didn’t answer. He was still too shocked by Evan’s words and needed to concentrate on another round of spells. Some of Barty’s bruises began to fade to yellow, some shallow wounds sealed shut. The Splinching injury was another story, though — he’d need more than his wand for that.

“Tell me he’s going to be okay, Reg!” Evan burst out, voice raw. “He’s my best mate!”

Regulus glanced at him sharply, frustration and fear bleeding into his voice. “I’m trying my best here, Evan! He’s my best mate too!”

“Yeah, I know,” Evan croaked, his face twisted. “But— but he’s my Isa, Reg—”

Regulus stilled, just for a second. The words hit like a slap.

His Isa.

He shoved the absurdity of the comparison far, far away — Evan, of course, didn’t know. Didn’t know a thing about the engagement, thought he’d just compared two friendships.

“I’ll be right back,” he muttered, and sprinted from the room.

He returned less than a minute later with a jar of Regenex Balm, thick and violet and pungent, and slathered it onto the shoulder wound. It stemmed the bleeding instantly, sealed off the worst of the damage — but for the flesh to knit he’d need to brew a full muscle and nerve regeneration draught.

Evan hadn’t moved. He just knelt there, hands still on Barty’s waist, eyes wide with shock.

“Do your parents know?” Regulus asked.

Evan shook his head fast. “No. They’re out tonight — they *can’t* know, Reg. Barty wouldn’t want that. It’s… it’ll get messy.”

Regulus stared at the blood streaking the tiles, smeared across Barty’s pale chest, soaking into Evan’s sleeves.

“Messier than *this*, Evan?” he snapped.

Evan dropped his forehead to Barty’s torso — and then broke into sobs.

They were soft, earnest sobs — quiet, tender. So full of helplessness and love that they were more heartbreaking than any scream could’ve been.

Regulus inhaled sharply, knelt beside him, and steadied his voice.

“Evan. When are they getting back?”

“I don’t know,” Evan gasped, not looking up. “Who fucking cares —

I'm not leaving him."

"I'm not asking you to," Regulus said. "But if you don't want your parents to find out, and they Floo in and find their entrance hall drenched in blood, what happens then?"

Evan let out a strangled groan. "Fuck. Fuck, *fuck* —"

"Floo back," Regulus said, already standing. "Clean it up. I'll handle him. I've got to brew a Reblooding Potion and prep a regeneration draught for the shoulder, but he's stable."

Evan looked up sharply, eyes soaked and pleading.

"He's stable?" he echoed. "He's — he's really going to be—"

"He's alive," Regulus said. "He's breathing, his pulse is steady. He'll wake up, alright? He's okay, Evan — I promise."

Evan's body buckled with the force of his relief. He let out a breath like a sob, and nodded — staggering to his feet on trembling legs. He cast one last look at Barty, chest still rising and falling in a shallow rhythm, before he stumbled to the fireplace and vanished in green flame.

Regulus exhaled shakily, then turned back to Barty.

Regulus had seen much, had been through much, had *suffered* much. He'd seen people kill, had seen people die, had killed, had almost died himself on several occasions. And yet, there was something about this which made it all pale. One of his best friends — skin bloodied, slick with sweat, streaked with bruised, hair stuck to the forehead in clumps.

No lopsided smirk, no fire in his eyes, no joking innuendo. No, instead Barty looked small, younger than he was. Heartbreakingly vulnerable. Just another boy, thrown into the depths of the world's cruelty by the one person meant to shield him from it.

Regulus knelt again, reached out with one hand, and brushed the blood-matted hair gently from Barty's face.

"Fuck, Barty," he whispered.

His voice cracked.

"*Fuck*."

*****

Regulus had levitated Barty to Sirius's old bedroom. The muscle and nerve generation draught took ten hours to brew, but at least the wound had been staunched and cleaned, and his blood supply was rapidly replenishing. Regulus kept a constant Heating Charm on him — Barty had been shivering from the cold, his body in shock from the blood loss. He still looked unnaturally pale but Regulus was fairly sure he'd be — at least physically — alright. He would've preferred to take him to St Mungo's and have an actual Healer take a look, but he knew better than anyone that some family ordeals were best kept private.

Regulus slept on a mattress on the floor. Evan was in the bed beside Barty — though as far away from him as the mattress would allow, as if he was terrified of touching him, like he might shatter if he came too close. He definitely hadn't slept at all.

Regulus wasn't much better. The entire night he drifted in and out of sleep and when the morning came, there were deep purple shadows under his eyes, his limbs heavy and cold with fatigue.

But he forgot about the tiredness instantly when he realised what had woken him.

Barty and Evan were talking.

"Fuck, Barty," Evan muttered, his voice thick with sleep. "Don't ever do that again — I thought you were dead."

Barty's voice came hoarse and low, but still warm. It sounded uncharacteristically fond too. "Nah, Evan. When I die, it's going to be fucking spectacular. Not from a Splinching wound, for fuck's sake."

Silence.

Then, more quietly: "And not by my fucking son of a bitch father either."

They both broke out in laughter.

Regulus took that as his cue to sit up. Barty had a bit of colour in his face now, though still pale, and there was a familiar shine to his eyes.

"God," Barty muttered, eyes flicking between the two of them. "I

must've died and gone to hell, if this is the company I'm keeping."

Regulus snorted. "You were in bad shape, Crouch. How are you feeling?"

Barty shifted slightly, winced, and gave a short cough. "Alright. Shoulder's creeping me the hell out, though."

Now it was Evan's turn to snort.

"The potion'll take another hour," Regulus said, checking the time. "But you will have your shoulder back soon."

Barty fell quiet again. His eyes locked on Regulus, something meaningful behind them.

"Thanks, mate," he said at last, voice low.

Regulus's throat tightened. "Sure, mate."

By Regulus's orders, Barty wasn't allowed out of bed until the potion had done its full work, so he'd asked Whiskerley to bring breakfast up to the room. They sat between the beds and mattress, plates of buttered toast, soft-boiled eggs, fried tomatoes and a pot of tea spread across the nightstand and mattress edge.

They were halfway through eating when Regulus finally spoke.

"What happened, Barty?"

Barty glanced at him, attempting a smirk. "What — didn't like my dramatic entrance, Black?"

Regulus knew what he was doing. He stared back, unimpressed.

Barty sighed, setting his tea down. "My dad and I had a row, just like usual. But this time it got messy. With everything going on I probably didn't follow the three D's properly and got myself splinched."

Regulus's mind flashed to the bruises and cuts on Barty's torso — the ones that didn't look like they came from Apparition.

Silence followed.

"Does…" Regulus hesitated. "Does it happen often?"

Barty raised an eyebrow and looked immediately uncomfortable. "The

fighting?"

Regulus didn't answer.

"Well, yes, Reg," Barty shot, voice dry. "In case you haven't noticed, we fight all the fucking time."

"I meant…," Regulus stared at him. "That kind of fighting."

Barty didn't look at him. He swallowed, throat working visibly. "Sometimes."

Regulus glanced sideways at Evan, who didn't look remotely surprised. Evan knew more about Barty than anyone, after all.

A scoff escaped Regulus before he could stop it.

He had never liked Mr. Crouch — the classic case of a man so obsessed with ambition he'd sacrificed everything for it, even his wife and only son. He'd left Mrs. Crouch's care — and all the fallout — to a boy far too young to handle any of it.

And the man was supposed to be a bloody example for society, too.

"Fucking rich. The Head of the Magical Law Enforcement abusing his own son."

Barty flinched at the words.

"Does anyone know?" Regulus continued. "The Head of the Mag—"

"No, and I'm not going to, Black, " Barty snapped, eyes sharp. "This is just how it works."

"How what works?"

"Like… us," Barty said bitterly. "This family, this world. I'm of age now — I'll avoid him whenever I can. But what you're suggesting? That's a fight I'm never going to win."

"But still—"

"He won't bother me, and I won't bother him. That's the deal."

Regulus shook his head, jaw tight. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Oh, don't be a hypocrite, Black."

The tone felt like a smack in his face. “What?”

Barty shot him a pointed look, eyes narrowed. “Those scars on your back — the ones that look like they’re from a fucking whip — didn’t get there by themselves, did they?”

Regulus froze.

Both Barty and Evan were looking at him now, sharp, calculating.

“You told someone about those?” Barty pressed.

Regulus didn’t move. Didn’t speak.

Barty continued, quieter now. “You never told us what happened, either. Or about who did it. So don’t lecture me about keeping quiet or ratting someone out.”

Regulus gave a curt nod, his throat drier than parchment.

“Takes one to know one, Reg,” Barty said, not unkindly.

A short silence stretched. Then Regulus cleared his throat.

“You’re staying here for the holidays, then?”

“If I can,” Barty said.

Regulus snorted. “Course you can.”

“Good,” Barty muttered. “I’d rather die than go back.”

Evan snorted. “No need for that. I’ve got rooms to spare.”

Barty cracked a grin. “Perfect. I’ll light up the place with my sparkling charm.”

Evan rolled his eyes, but Regulus was relieved to hear Barty laugh again.

“I’m gonna be alright, you know, Black,” Barty said, voice a bit rough.

Regulus nodded. “Sure you are.”

His words came out stronger than he felt. Because yes — with his friends, Barty would always have a place.

But still, it didn’t sit right. It didn’t stop the clamp in Regulus’s gut —

that deep, gnawing weight he couldn't shake.

Barty was going through it — Warrington, his mum, now whatever had happened between him and his father… And Regulus couldn't unsee it, that image burned into him — Barty, soaked in blood, barely conscious.

And Evan — his face laced with such raw terror and despair — a bit like Regulus imagined his own face would look, if he ever found James like that.

*****

The next day, Regulus managed to slip away from the usual banter between Evan and Barty without raising too much suspicion. He and Isa had agreed not to tell anyone about their impending engagement just yet, feeling they both needed a moment to process it properly, to hold it to themselves before opening the floodgates to everyone else's opinions and questions.

So, instead of telling them he was having dinner with his future in-laws to discuss marital conditions, he claimed he had some Revolution business to attend to and told them Whiskerley would handle dinner. He did realise though, that they must've considered it strange that he was wearing his finest set of robes. He looked dashing — navy dress robes of the finest cut, subtly embroidered with silver along the cuffs, and his hair falling in perfect, soft curls. Yes, Regulus had made sure he looked his absolute best for the occasion.

Because this was it. It was now or never. This was his only shot. The only opportunity, the only way to get Mr. Nott to do what he really, desperately needed him to do.

So yes — he was nervous. More nervous than he'd even been during their first dinner. And yet, dinner went surprisingly well.

Over bowls of wild mushroom consommé, followed by venison with blackberry jus and celeriac mash, they worked through the practicalities raised at their last meeting. Everything was ready to be finalised by their solicitors once Isa officially accepted his proposal — which, of course, they all knew she would.

Still, Regulus's nerves built steadily with every course cleared. During the main, it simmered in his chest — hot, steady, not yet overwhelming. By the cheese course — a creamy French selection with toasted walnuts and grapes — the sensation worsened. Every bite

was a struggle, and conversation blurred into noise. By dessert — a delicate elderflower tart with poached pears — he barely managed a forkful and downed two glasses of Firewhiskey to summon some liquid courage.

When the alcohol began to take hold, he set down his glass and drew a slow breath before turning to Isa's parents.

"Dinner was exquisite, Vivienne," he said, trying to keep his voice smooth.

It still felt wrong, saying their names like that. Mr. and Mrs. Nott had insisted they use first names now that things were formal, but the shift felt unnatural, awkward on his tongue. He all but stumbled over it.

"Now that we've addressed the matters raised last time, I'd like to discuss two non-negotiable points."

Mrs. Nott raised her brow in confusion, then exchanged a brief glance with her husband.

"But I'd prefer to speak with you alone, Magnus," Regulus added quickly. "Not to say your presence isn't valued, Vivienne — of course not — only that this particular matter feels… more suited to a man-to-man discussion."

Mrs. Nott's face twitched with poorly hidden curiosity, and her lips parted like she might object, but Mr. Nott cut her off with a nod. "We'll have a drink in the drawing room, then," he nodded, his face contemplative but otherwise perfectly schooled.

They rose from the table and Regulus followed him through the corridors, miraculously managing to appear composed despite the hammering in his chest.

In the drawing room, Mr. Nott gestured for him to sit in one of the grand leather chairs while Sable fetched them glasses of some horrible liquor.

Once they were settled, Mr. Nott turned to him, glass in hand. "Well, Regulus — what is this about?"

Regulus set his drink gently on the table. He had to be sharp. He had to make this feel natural — unrehearsed — while keeping every word watertight.

He met Mr. Nott's gaze.

"You know I love Isa. I've loved her since I met her."

Not a lie, exactly — more of an embellishment. He *did* love her, of course, just not in the way the Notts assumed.

Mr. Nott nodded slowly, watching him carefully.

"We've all known this marriage was coming for years, and we're both happy about it. But you know how Isa is — strong-minded, fierce, and with an insatiable urge to push the boundaries."

To an outsider, it might've sounded like a vague preamble — the kind of filler that preceded the real topic. But Regulus knew better. He knew this was the most delicate part. He had to play this card — the card of Isa not *quite* agreeing on everything in the traditional world — very well. Taking it too far could lead to irreversible backlash. Taking it not far enough would deny Isa of her only wish.

Mr. Nott did not seem to give it too much attention and only gave a short laugh. "Well, yes, absolutely."

Regulus pressed on. "Isa and I have grown up together. We've seen each other through childhood, adolescence… now adulthood. We've seen the best and worst of each other."

Mr. Nott nodded again, though a flicker of confusion passed across his face.

"And I've learned," Regulus continued, "that to keep Isa from going too far off course, you have to compromise. You have to choose your battles."

They were almost there now — the real point.

Mr. Nott's expression sharpened. His hands stilled around the glass.

"What are you getting at, Regulus?"

"She wants to keep her birth name."

Mr. Nott froze. He blinked. "I'm sorry — what?"

Regulus leaned forward slightly, rushing — while trying to come across composed and relaxed — to substantiate before Mr. Nott could turn it down.

“It’s unorthodox, I know,” he offered. “But she takes great pride in her name. She’s proud to be a Nott, proud to be Magnus Alaric Nott’s oldest daughter. She doesn’t want to lose that.”

“And you’re… comfortable with this?” Mr. Nott asked, baffled.

Regulus offered a wry smile. “Like I said — choosing battles. I’ve learnt to move with Isa, within reason, rather than to counter her so fiercely I might put her at odds with our ways entirely.”

Mr. Nott considered that for a moment, brows drawn.

“She’s going to be my wife for the rest of my life,” Regulus explained. “The mother of my children. The person I’ll wake up next to every day. Legally, socially, and magically — she’ll be mine in every way. If she wants to keep the name Nott while doing so… who am I to deny her that?”

Silence settled between them. Then Mr. Nott gave a slow, grudging nod. Regulus could see he needed time for the idea to land. His mind was likely already spinning with how to relay this to Vivienne.

“And the other matter?” Mr. Nott asked eventually.

“Ah, that concerns me. Isa doesn’t know about it yet. I’ll tell her — in due time.”

Another silence stretched.

This was the hard part. Now or never.

Because with that letter — with the engagement formally in motion and negotiations unfolding — Magnus Nott had unknowingly handed Regulus the perfect opportunity to ask for a favour. And with a future, with a new proverbial blank sheet, he found himself the perfect cover to ask for it. But he just needed to sell it.

And he really, *really* wished that Mr. Nott had had nothing to do with the Obliviation ordeal. Because if he had — if he was implicated in any way — he would never ever agree on doing this. And that would leave Regulus with nothing.

Regulus took a slow breath. “I’ve got some issues with my memory.”

Mr. Nott raised a brow, his expression so baffled that Regulus would’ve laughed at it if he didn’t feel the nerves were eating him

alive.

“Not with recent things. It’s… from long ago.”

Regulus paused deliberately, hoping that it would click in place for Mr. Nott.

“Your childhood,” Mr. Nott said quietly.

Regulus nodded. “You can understand why it’s hard to come to terms with something I can’t fully remember. I don’t know the scope of it, the details…”

Mr. Nott’s eyes were sharp now. “What are you asking, Regulus?”

“I want you to perform a full memory restoration ritual. I need to know what happened. I need closure from my childhood before my adulthood starts. Closure from the past before my future with Isa starts.”

Mr. Nott leaned back slightly, the concern now plain on his face. His eyes were brimming with the ferocity of it. “Regulus… do you understand what that ritual entails?”

Regulus said nothing.

“It’s an intricate, dangerous thing,” Mr. Nott said slowly. “It forces you to relive everything. All of it.”

“I know.”

“There’s a reason you don’t remember. That’s your mind protecting your soul. If you relive everything… if you know everything — it could destroy you.”

Despite Mr. Nott’s words, relief flooded him — sudden, sharp, absolute.

He did everything in his power not to let it show. Because he knew — he knew by Mr. Nott’s reaction that he hadn’t been involved. Mr. Nott’s concern was real, rooted in fear for Regulus’s sanity, not in fear of being found out. So he had no idea. And that meant Mr. Nott hadn’t been involved.

“There are people who’ve gone completely mad after undergoing this ritual, Regulus,” Mr. Nott said quietly. “And they didn’t have childhoods half as traumatic as yours.”

He knew this. He knew that it was a gruesome process. Even people with a normal, carefree life would have a hard time with the ritual — just the fact that one's reliving a lifetime of emotions in such a small span of time could drive someone mad.

What Mr. Nott didn't know, however, was that Regulus did not need this ritual to remember his governor. No — those memories were carved into his bones. He remembered everything the man had done, down to the last sickening detail. He relived it in his dreams every night.

But a strong mind could steer. Could cling to certain memories — to the places he longed to return to — and let the others pass by, half-glimpsed.

And well, there were certain parts that Regulus desperately wanted to cling to.

"I can take it. I have to know," Regulus said firmly. "I *want* to know."

And *oh*, how he would eventually eat those words.

Chapter End Notes

Soo curious what you guys are thinking!

Lots of love, as always x

Chapter 24: Of Envy & Souls

Chapter Notes

> Alright I did NOT plan to go awol for so long but life got crazy (and will probably stay crazy for a while). This is another longer chapter and I hope you'll enjoy. Thank you so much for the comments and kudos. I will answer to comments soon, but wanted to upload this first.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, what do you think?”

“I think if this takes another minute I might actually kill myself.”

“Yeah, yeah. Okay, next one — what about this?”

“*Please* , make him stop, Evan.”

“Fuck you, Black,” Barty shot back. “Just… what does this outfit *say* to you?”

Regulus gave him a long, exaggerated once-over. Barty was wearing one of Regulus’s robes — the seventh set, by Regulus’s unfortunate count — and Regulus could hardly see a difference between this and the last six. They were all equally formal, all stiff, all a bit too tight across Barty’s shoulders. Barty wasn’t much bigger than Regulus, only broader, and well, since Flooing back to either Hogwarts or to his father’s wasn’t an option, he was stuck borrowing clothes from Regulus or Evan for the break.

Evan’s things were far too long, and apparently, Barty preferred slightly tight over absolutely dragging, which meant he had spent the better part of the last hour raiding every wardrobe in Black Manor.

“…What does it tell me?” Regulus echoed, flatly.

The bloke was actually worse than Isa.

“Yes,” Barty nodded, as if this was a perfectly reasonable question.

Regulus sighed. “It tells me that you’ve been trying on robes for an hour and a half and that you’re *alarmingly* pathetic, Crouch.”

Barty hurled a pillow at his head.

Evan, standing in the doorway, snorted. “Didn’t know a night out would turn you into such a girl.”

“I’m not a girl,” Barty snapped. “I’m just saying — first impressions matter.”

Regulus arched a brow. “Probably everyone who’ll be there tonight has seen you before.”

“Yeah, but not like this.”

And, well… Barty had a point.

They were headed to drinks at Malfoy Manor — an informal gathering with some of the Revolution’s inner circle. Regulus didn’t know who was attending exactly, but he knew that besides Evan and Barty, Mulciber and Avery would have their first real introduction to the cause in a semi-official context.

Barty clearly felt he had a lot to prove — and in some way he had, with Mr. Crouch as his father. Regulus, having a million things to do including finishing his load of homework and doing exercises to strengthen his mind in preparation for the Ritual, wasn’t particularly looking forward to the evening, but his presence was expected and with Barty practically being a human Bombarda, he felt it’d be actually wise to be there.

Luckily it wasn’t anything formal — they wouldn’t give away any classified information to a bunch of Hogwarts students after all. No, instead of an oval table in Bellatrix’s meeting room, they were having drinks in Lucius’s drawing room.

And truth be told, Regulus was also, deep down, pleased by an evening filled with distractions. The entire week had been marked by a strange conjuncture of nerves at the thought of the ritual and a strange sense of calmness knowing that in a few days, at least he’d know. A constant eb and flow, back and forth, up and down of dread and relief. At least tonight, his mind would have other things to focus on.

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And Regulus had been right — the evening *was* a distraction. He just hadn't really calculated in the fact that it wouldn't necessarily be a good one. There was a buzzing tension under his skin the entire night, a low hum in his gut he couldn't quite place.

It started off a bit uncomfortable with the group trying to find its footing. Naturally, Yaxley and Rodolphus were there, loud and brash as always. Barty immediately inserted himself beside them and tried to match their antics, but it came off as a bit forced and unnatural. Lucius was of course the perfect host, calm and friendly and keeping the group together. Evan, contrary to his best friend, was quieter, measuring the room between Regulus and Rabastan. Mulciber and Avery drifted somewhere in the middle of all this — cracking jokes and playing along but in a way that made clear that they belonged there.

They did exactly what a group of nine blokes in their late teens and mid-twentie was expected to do. They drank an absurd amount of liquor, toasted rowdily, cheered, played cards and shared Hogwarts gossip — either current or from back in the days — and, of course, talked a lot about girls.

They were two hours and several empty bottles in when the topic eventually shifted to the Revolution — the common thread, the thing that had brought them together in Lucius's drawing room in the first place.

They were comfortably draped around the luxurious drawing room like they'd been friends for years. Regulus sat on the couch between Evan and Rabastan while Barty had wedged himself next to Yaxley. Lucius lounged in an armchair, looking amused at Rodolphus and Avery who were arguing over poker chips. Mulciber sat on the floor with his back against the table leg. The room was filled with the scent of liquor, cigars and the remnants of the snack strewn across the table.

Yaxley smirked, swirling his drink. "So… you lot really want in, do you? Like our dear Regulus?"

Barty sat up so quickly it was like he'd been electrified. "Fuck yes."

The rest affirmed in a calmer way — Mulciber and Avery simply nodded while Evan gave a slow, deliberate incline of his head.

Barty leaned forward, practically vibrating. "I'm ready," he said, a gleam in his eyes. "More than ready. Just tell me what to do."

Rabastan, who had been rather quiet all night, spoke up. “Does your father know?”

Something almost dangerous flickered in Barty’s eyes — a tense mix of anger and shame. Rabastan seemed to have noticed too.

“I mean,” he clarified, ”does he know about your allegiances?”

“He’s broken with his father,” Evan offered in Barty’s place, sipping his drink. “Been staying most of the holidays with me and Reg for years now.”

That wasn’t *entirely* true — yes, Barty spent most of his holidays away from his father, but he hadn’t officially cut ties. Regulus was quite sure that no matter how bad it’d become between them, Mr. Crouch would never officially disown his son. He couldn’t risk [like smearing?] his name.

Regulus chose not to correct him.

“I don’t want anything to do with him,” Barty said. “Joining the Revolution is the best fucking way to spit in his face.”

Yaxley howled with laughter and raised his glass. “To patricide — the symbolic kind.”

The others echoed the toast.

Then Avery piped up. “So what does that actually mean? Joining, I mean. What are we supposed to do?”

Rodolphus shrugged. “Surveillance, recruitment, sometimes fieldwork — depending also on whether you’re at Hogwarts or graduated.”

“So… fighting,” Mulciber said, voice almost dreamy. “Can’t wait.”

“It’s not all fun and games,” Rabastan chimed in, his voice remarkably sober in the current setting. There was a sour lilt to it, too. “It’s dangerous and messy.”

Regulus understood him. Rabastan’s brother had been imprisoned for weeks and his best friend had been killed helping to break him out. If anyone in this room knew the true cost of the Revolution, it was him.

Yaxley gave a nod, then grinned in a way that was clearly meant to lift the mood. “Yeah, and — we can’t all be like Black at that age, can we?”

Regulus stiffened instantly. He didn't respond — he just tried to let the words slide off and pointedly ignored Evan's and Barty's eyes practically boring holes into him.

"Oh, I'm sure he's unstoppable," Evan said mildly, though his gaze didn't waver from Regulus's face. There was admiration in his voice — but also something sharper, something unreadable.

In utter discomfort, Regulus's fingers drifted instinctively to the visible sliver of the Mark on his forearm. He'd never shared anything about the role he'd played. He couldn't really pinpoint why, but something in him wanted to keep this information from them. He had no idea how to explain his pivotal role in the Hohenhain breach, or how he'd fought alongside people as old as their father — hell, how he had *actually* fought at Evan's father's side…

Regulus knew it was futile. If Barty and Evan were truly joining the Revolution, they were bound to find out about most of it eventually. But still, something in him wanted to keep these two worlds separate for as long as he could.

"Saved all our arses more than once, Black," Yaxley added, grinning as he raised his glass. "Would've been a corpse three times over if not for you."

Rodolphus gave a dark chuckle. "And if anyone found out it was our precious sixteen-year-old pulling the strings at Hohenhain…"

That did it. Evan's and Barty's heads snapped towards him.

He watched it happen — saw the pieces fall into place behind their eyes. Evan's expression turned quietly impressed, thoughtful even. But Barty's…

There was something feral in it. There was admiration, yes, but also something else. Hunger… Calculation. And something that looked uncomfortably like betrayal.

Regulus looked away.

Lucius, who had been watching the exchange, straightened and was clearly about to intervene when distraction came from an unexpected source.

The fireplace flared suddenly with green flame, and four more figures stepped through one by one, smoke curling around their polished

boots.

Rowle grinned. “Started the party without us, have you?”

Mr. Rosier clapped Evan warmly on the shoulder as he stepped aside to let the others through. “Evening, son.”

“Hi, Dad,” Evan said with a slightly sheepish smile.

The others all stood to greet them — hands shaken, pouring drinks and laughing.

“Regulus,” said Mr. Nott with a nod, clapping him solidly on the back.

Regulus gave a polite but still rather stiff smile. He knew he’d have to get over his discomfort soon, seeing Mr. Nott was about to become his bloody father-in-law, but he just couldn't help it. “Nice of you to join us, Magnus.”

“Regulus!” Mr. Rosier chimed in. “Long time no see!”

They all laughed, knowing that they’d seen each other recently — at Mr. Rosier’s house, even.

Regulus was still aware of Barty’s eyes on him, watching quietly, as if trying to make sense of things. Regulus chose not to meet his gaze.

The evening progressed in the same way — they drank, toasted, laughed. They played poker. They shared gossip, politics and plans. They all applauded and laughed as Evan nearly choked on one of his father’s cigars. They cheered and jeered as Lucius and Yaxley duelled for show, knocking over two chairs and a lamp.

In short, it was a good evening — memorable, even.

Regulus watched his friends all night — Barty and Even smiling more than Regulus had seen in weeks. They were clearly thrilled, nearly giddy with it. To be included, to being on the inside for once. They looked like boys who’d just been handed the keys to a kingdom.

Regulus knew, at some point, he’d have to remind them that this kingdom came with blood on the marble floors and nightmares in every corridor.

That this was not, as Rabastan had said, all fun and games.

He didn’t need to, though, because the reminder came on its own.

Lucius and Yaxley were duelling again — a proper one this time. No more playful jabs, but real spells now with real force. Their wands moved fast, sending sparks flying through the room. The crowd had split into two, shifting to either side of the room to watch. Regulus stood at one side with Barty, Evan and Rabastan, a drink in his hand.

The chatter around them quieted slightly as the duel grew more intense.

It was then that Barty, eyes tracking across the room, said — almost absentmindedly — "Knew we were missing someone."

Evan glanced sideways. "What?"

"Dolohov," Barty said, nodding. "That's who it is. He's not here."

Regulus froze instantly. Beside him, he felt Rabastan still completely too.

Rabastan turned slowly to look at Barty. His voice was hollow, almost businesslike.

"Antonin is dead."

The words landed like a slap.

Evan blinked. "W–what? Are you serious?"

Rabastan didn't look at them, instead steering his gaze back on the duel. "Yeah."

There was a brief silence in which Barty and Evan were undoubtedly trying to compose themselves.

"How? What happened?" Barty asked.

Rabastan finally turned — not to them, but to Regulus. His face was unreadable. "You'll have to ask Black," he said, voice flat. "He was there when it happened, I heard."

He placed his glass down with a final, decisive thud, and then walked away.

Both Barty and Evan turned to Regulus, wide-eyed, waiting.

Regulus's mind instantly snapped back to that moment. To Hohenhain — to the chaos, the smoke, the screaming. The heat of spellfire on all

sides, the sound of someone yelling his name. The words of Mr. Nott in his ears. And to the sight of Dolohov clashing with a guard, a flash of green. Someone screaming — perhaps it had been Regulus, perhaps not. But Dolohov fell — fell and fell. Dead before he hit the ground.

Completely still, eyes open.

Dead.

Barty and Evan hadn't said another word. They were still staring at him, waiting for an explanation — anything.

From across the room, Yaxley called out, voice loud and cheery. "Oi! Black — your turn! You're up against Magnus!"

Regulus placed his drink down beside Rabastan's, the crystal clinking faintly against the table.

He looked back at his friends.

"Like he said," he said, "not all fun and games."

Then he turned and walked to the impromptu duelling area, heart beating far too fast for the grin he forced as he nodded at Magnus Nott.

But as he passed, he caught Barty's gaze again.

And this time, he understood it.

The same look from earlier — that unreadable thing behind Barty's eyes — it hadn't gone away. And the fact that it was still there — despite having heard mere seconds ago about Antonin Dolohov dying in front of Regulus — sent cold worry straight through him.

Because it was envy. Barty''s look was *envious* .

And again, Regulus found his head snapping back to something from the past — to the first of September, to the Hogwarts Express. To that conversation with Isa and Evan.

"He envies you, Reg."

"You're having a laugh."

"Well, you know… being the golden boy and all."

*****

The closer he came to that last Thursday of the Easter Holidays, the stranger a phenomenon time became. It seemed to crawl, slower than molasses, every tick and every tack of the clock dragging itself out like a dying breath. And yet, the moment he stepped out of the fireplace at the Notts' estate in Manchester, it felt as though no time had passed at all.

Mr. Nott had tried to talk him out of it — repeatedly and each time in a slightly more creative, slightly more desperate way. But eventually, Regulus's refusal must've made it clear that there was no changing his mind. He would do this, he *had* to do this.

Still, Mr. Nott's concern was genuine and definitely well-founded, so they had struck a deal. Regulus wasn't allowed to be alone.

Mr. Nott had given him the freedom to choose whoever he wanted — had even offered to stay himself — but he was only doing it if Regulus allowed someone to be there in the room with him. Regulus found himself rather annoyed by this, but deep down he knew Mr. Nott was right. The risk of something happening was too big, he'd need someone to watch over him.

In his attempts to dissuade him, Mr. Nott had described the process in detail. It was, in essence, a deep, unrelenting dive into one's life — all of it. Even the most well-hidden, deeply buried, long-forgotten memories would resurface. And he'd have to live through all of them — feel everything he'd felt back then.

Where the mind might normally cushion the blow, offering time to process emotion or shielding itself by locking things safely away, the Ritual did the opposite. Regulus would relive everything instantly. There'd be no time to process, no space to breathe. It would unfold rapidly and without mercy — memory after memory crashing down, each saturated with the emotion he'd felt the first time.

There'd be no way out. Once in, there'd be no escape until the very last memory had run its course.

There was no way to tell how he'd take it. Some people screamed, some thrashed, some sobbed. Others never came back the same. And yes, in some cases, the body simply gave out — heart failure, seizures, shock.

There was a real chance that he wouldn't make it out alive.

Because so much emotional heartbreak in a lifetime — surely it'd leave physical traces, too?

Regulus then had been forced to admit that Mr. Nott's persistence on him not being alone was actually wise. But he'd die of shame if it were his future father-in-law standing at his bed, seeing and hearing him scream, cry and whatnot.

So he'd chosen Isa.

Mr. Nott had sworn secrecy. The fact that he'd even offered to make an Unbreakable Vow spoke volumes about his trustworthiness. Regulus had told Isa the same story he'd told Mr. Nott — about him needing closure from his past — but Regulus had the distinct feeling the story sounded less credible to his best friend than to her father.

Still, she hadn't pressed. Perhaps she was wise enough to leave it be. Or perhaps she was just too overwhelmed by the fact that Regulus was about to undergo one of the most dangerous and invasive Mind Rituals known to wizardkind — and the part she was being asked to play in it.

Even so, it hadn't surprised him when she tried, one last time, to talk him out of it — after he'd finally taken his place in the guest room Mr. Nott had prepared.

The man had clearly thought it through. The room itself was meticulously arranged. The fireplace was lit to a low, comfortable warmth, and a selection of potions sat on the writing desk — labelled, measured, and arranged with military precision. Regulus recognised calming draughts, blood-pressure stabilisers and heart-rate reducers. There was also a stack of neatly folded cloths, a basin, towels…

Everything one might need to tend to someone in severe physical or emotional distress.

Mr. Nott had described, too, how the Ritual would be performed. It was one of the most complex and dangerous forms of memory magic known to the wizarding world. It could only be performed under a full moon — something to do with the thinning of the Veil and the natural link between time and tides. It had to begin after sunset.

The first stage involved incantations of binding and containment — mostly protective wards, to prevent memories from bleeding into the physical space. Then, both he and Mr. Nott would drink a potion — Regulus to enter the trance state, Mr. Nott to act as the anchor

between memory and reality.

It did him good, knowing the man had thought of everything. He felt a strange, uncharacteristic warmth towards him — knowing that Mr. Nott had prepared so thoroughly, had done all he could to ready Regulus for what was coming.

And yet, as he stood there now, in the centre of the room, facing Isa, he didn't feel ready for anything at all.

He felt terrified.

Isa looked as nervous as he felt — standing still, arms folded tightly over her chest, her eyes locked on his, the desperation behind them visible.

"We can still back out," she said. Her voice was thick, hoarse. "We can still stop, Reg."

Regulus shook his head. "No."

A flicker passed over her face — a flinch — but she didn't argue again.

She just stood there, watching.

And, in complete silence, he began to undress.

He started with his outer robes. He unclasped them slowly, letting the fabric slip from his shoulders, folding it neatly over his arm before placing it on the chair beside the fire. Next came the vest — buttons undone one by one, his fingers stiff and unfamiliar. Then the shirt — crisp white, sleeves already rolled up. He pulled it over his head, exposing skin that felt far too cold in the warm room. The Mark on his arm shifted — almost imperceptibly.

He paused, breathed.

Then, he unbuckled his belt. His trousers slid down next.

He stood there, in nothing but his boxers, a moment longer than necessary. In another setting, he might've felt self-conscious — standing like this in front of her. But perhaps he was used to it by now. She'd seen all of him before, anyway. Or perhaps his mind was already too preoccupied with what was to come that he couldn't bring himself to care.

With another breath he forced himself to steady himself and then, still

without a word, he reached for the loose, comfortable cotton trousers Mr. Nott had left out — dark grey, soft. He pulled them on, followed by a simple sleeveless undershirt.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, the mattress creaking faintly under his weight, and laced his fingers loosely together.

A moment later, the door creaked open and Mr. Nott stepped in.

He looked calm and contemplative. His robes were buttoned high, but his sleeves rolled up slightly. He glanced briefly at Isa before his eyes settled on Regulus.

“You ready?” he asked, voice low and even.

Regulus met his gaze. Nodded once.

“As I’ll ever be.”

*****

It was like a dream, but more of a lucid one. The kind had by someone still unskilled in the art — the person who *knew* it was a dream, but couldn’t quite control it yet. Not until later, until they’d learned how.

And Mr. Nott had been right — it was indeed like he was seeing his entire life unfold in front of him while at the same time being there, being part of it all, living it. The inner and the outer, the here and the there, the now and the back then — all folding into each other, crossing, fading, twining together like smoke.

It took time to adjust. No matter how extensive his Occlumency experience, no matter how strong the state of his mind, no matter how vivid the nightmares tormenting him night after night, nothing could have prepared him for this. Nothing could have prepared him for the rawness, the intensity, the vividness of what he was experiencing now.

These weren’t thoughts. These weren’t memories. This was him travelling back with a time turner — and not as an observer, but as the one undergoing, experiencing it.

He was *there*. He was actually — fully and wholly — there, present and breathing and feeling everything for another time.

He was right back there in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place, Sirius beside him. They must've been five and six — Sirius with wild, unbrushed curls and a mouth smeared with jam, Regulus a little smaller, more careful, hair parted neatly to one side. Kreacher had made them lunch and was tasked with overseeing them while Mother and Father were out.

Regulus heard the front door opening in the distance, marking the return of his parents. As always, their presence wasn't only marked by their sounds, but just as much by the tightening in the air.

Sirius looked up, hopeful. "Daddy, did you buy sweets?"

"No," their mother cut in, before their father could answer. Her voice was sharp, clipped. "And it's Father, Sirius. Not 'Daddy'."

Sirius's face fell. Just slightly — but enough for Regulus to notice.

A beat passed, then he leaned towards Regulus.

"Why can Andy and Bella and Cissy call their parents Mummy and Daddy, and we can't?" he whispered.

And Regulus had no answer to that.

And he was back too in the garden at Dreadmoor Keep, hiding behind a box hedge with Cissy. Their giggles were stifled in the gaps between branches. Somewhere out on the lawn, Andromeda's voice rang out, sing-song and teasing.

"Where are youuuu? I know you're here somewheeeeere!"

From somewhere else, Bellatrix's voice sounded. "I see them! Over there!"

"She always ruins it!" Cissy hissed, furious.

Andy, however, was unbothered and ignored them all. Instead, she continued with the game as if nothing had been said at all.

And he was back too, at one of these stiff, silent Christmas dinners. Most children were left to their House Elves or nannies, but Sirius and Regulus were expected to sit through every meal like miniature adults, even if they nearly fell asleep at the table.

And he was back, too, in the Notts' kitchen — small and thin-legged, sat on a stool beside Isa. She reached into a jar and stole a sweet with a grin, then held the jar out to him.

“Go on,” she whispered, her brown eyes twinkling with mischief. “Just one.”

“We can’t,” he said, frowning. “Your mum said we can’t.”

“She won’t notice,” Isa replied with utter certainty. “Go on, Reg.”

It was a lot.

So many people, so many moments, so many feelings rushing over him, dragging him under. It was like sensory overload — too many emotions all at once, crashing into his system. His nerves felt raw, his body caught somewhere between tension and collapse, forced to process lifetimes of emotion in the space of mere minutes. And he hadn’t even reached the reason he was here — the moment it all centred around — before he’d already taken a long, harrowing dive into the very core of himself.

And so much of it — so *much* — was Sirius.

Sirius, creeping into his room late at night, that mischievous glint in his eye, breath warm with the smell of toothpaste, coming to tell him a bedtime story — and falling asleep next to him before it was over.

Sirius, teaching him to fly a toy broom in the garden, both of them shrieking with laughter, robes whipping around them like wings.

Sirius, waving madly from the Hogwarts Express on the first of September, his face pressed against the glass, already halfway out of Regulus’s reach.

But strangely, it wasn’t the sadness or the loss that overwhelmed him. No, instead it was the beauty of it, the warmth, the *love* that seemed to slam into him and left him breathless. The ache grew and grew, but it didn’t come from what he lacked — but from what he’d once had. The sensation bloomed in him like light pressing against the walls of his heart — a love so immense and all-consuming it almost hurt.

And perhaps that was a good thing. Perhaps it was good that this came first. That he had this buffer, this reminder of what was good, what was soft, what had once felt safe. Because at some point, inevitably, he couldn’t outrun it any longer. At some point he was there.

At some point all of it hit. And it hit *hard*.

It started with that lullaby — that haunting, too-familiar sequence of tones that slipped into his soul like a knife disguised as a feather. A sound that was supposed to be beautiful — like the distant echo of the sea — but the water was venomous and it pulled him under.

He heard it close, far too close, just by the shell of his ear — the soft breath of the man singing it brushing his skin, stirring the air, making his stomach twist with the memory of it.

"Dors, mon trésor, dors bien ce soir,

Les étoiles brillent, la lune te voit…"

And then the dam broke.

The poisoned water surged through, spilled over the banks and into every part of him. It flooded his pores, his lungs, his veins — like a low wind rising, then twisting into a whirlwind, slamming into him from the inside out. Like a single grain of sand multiplying, until it became a dune burying him alive.

He saw it all, heard it all, *felt* it all.

So wonderful — such a wonderful boy — the stench of the governor's breath against his cheek — the creak of the bed — you're special, Reg — the sound of that low chuckle — the weight of silence before the door opened — we're doing French today — I've bought you a present, Reg — the sun sinking beyond the windows — the stillness soon broken by the sound of the door, the soft patter of steps on the carpet — the numbness, the defeat, the gut-wrenching suffocation as he felt the mattress dip — don't you love me, Reg? — the nausea, the fear, the paralysis that the trailing fingers left in their wake — the shame threatening to burn him alive, turn him into ash — oh, why didn't he turn into ash? — for dust you are, and to dust you shall return — please, let me turn into nothing but dust, blow me away, into nothingness, a nothingness as hollow as my heart, my soul — *so wonderful* — wasn't he supposed to protect him? — wasn't he worthy of protecting? — betrayed by everything and everyone — betrayed by himself most of all — by the love that, despite everything, dominated — don't you love me, Reg? — *so special* — I love you, my boy — no one but him, no one but him to love—

Every word, every sickening touch, every treacherous whisper, every poisonous smile and mortal declaration of love tore through him like a knife, cutting him into pieces. His soul reduced to nothing but

splinters of abhorrence, his mind depleted of any value, leaving him with nothing — nothing but ache, hate and *hurt*.

His entire body trashed, convulsed. He shouted, shrieked, screamed. He had no sense of anything but the torture playing out in his head. Didn't register Isa trying to hold him down, didn't hear her voice calling to him, trying to quiet his cries from hurt, to soothe his pleas for help. Didn't feel her pour the Calming Draught into his mouth — most of which he spat out through another agonised shriek. Didn't register her body curled around his, trying to ground him, to bring him back into the world through the feeling of another human being, another beating heart against his.

And it climbed, and climbed, the agony, te pain forcing him up and up and up — dragging him into the sky only to throw him into fire — no stairs to heaven — no, he did not get to have stairs — just a plain, rickety ladder, as undignified as him — and not up to a layer of heaven, but instead into the darkest circle of hell — or perhaps was he going, down, down, down? No garden of Eden, just a field of wilted flowers turning into desert sand—

But he crashed. He *fell*. And then he came back.

Back to Hogwarts.

Back to the Sorting, all those years ago, where the hurt in Sirius's eyes had struck like an arrow to the chest — the pain easing only when he saw that hand held out to him.

"Hi. I'm Barty."

"Hi. I'm Regulus."

"I know you," Evan said, glancing sideways at Barty.

Regulus answered for him. "He's the politician's son."

Barty's eyes darkened, just for a moment, before he masked it. "I thought the Black son was already at Hogwarts. Wasn't he in Gryffindor?"

"That's my brother," Regulus said quietly. "I'm the second son."

And it all came rushing back — his years at school, the holidays in between. His dormitory, his friends. Quidditch try-outs in second year. His first trip to Hogsmeade with Barty and Evan. Playing chess with Sirius in the drawing room at Grimmauld Place. Late-night library

visits with Isa. And… the smile of James.

And finally, it started to balance.

Finally, it felt like he could breathe again — the good fighting the bad, the warmth steadying the cold, the love anchoring the hurt. Slowly, inch by inch, his body seemed to remember itself: his breathing evened, his pulse softened.

The image of James in the Entrance Hall, Sirius bleeding to death in his arms — *Potter! Get your mind back here, Potter! I need you!* — balanced by that look on James's face, the one he'd worn when he said, *You can't go back there. You can't go back to her.*

Bellatrix's cruel, ringing laugh, tempered by James's casual smirk — *Yeah yeah, we'll compete too. Right — Black?*

The excruciating pain by the Numbing Cream and the shame of having James apply it to his back, balanced by the *Go smash it, Black,* and the memory of them slamming together onto the floor in one of the duel exercises. *Fuck. You Alright? Yeah — just a bit… peachy* , leaving the roaring with laughter. *That was fun Black. Yeah. Yeah, it was.*

The fights with Sirius, the haunting image of Cissy in white, his own steps echoing down the aisle — all countered by James's fierce eyes and fiercer words. *Look, Black. We're in this together. In what? In everything! The unity assignments, Christmas, Davies, Moony — all of it!*

The shame, the pain of carrying a burden too heavy for a child — soothed by James's voice. *Something that feels like this can't be… can't be wrong. Something this pure… this real… it just can't be wrong.*

The feeling of Mother's whipping wand on his body dulled by *Let's forget it all. Forget the names, the heritage, the politics. Let's just… focus on this. The rest can wait.*

The expectations, the anxiety, the nerves of all the Meetings, outweighed by the *I didn't expect you to be a cuddler, Black* , James's voice muffled against Regulus's chest.

The horror of Mathilde Legot's father — of what Regulus had helped bring about — balanced by James's eyes wide with awe, *You fancy me* ! *No, you fancy me. This is brilliant!*

The desecration of his body by another man, the hollow, violated ache — countered by his own voice, spilling out like a secret: *Come for me,*

James. And that complete awe plain on James's face. *You said my name.*

The emptiness and loneliness of being second, coming after and being forgotten, eclipsed by James's stories about his mother. *She'd love you, you know. She wouldn't mind, you know… this* .

All the self-loathing, the tears and self-flagellation outshone by those words. *You're not broken, Reg. On the contrary — you're so gifted. And so bloody beautiful.*

The reality of the Mark and its sacrifice softened by a little pin gifted by James. *Black for you, obviously. And gold… for me. I'm rather fond of it. Of Black and Gold.*

The looming nerves before every game, every paper, every mission — outweighed by a single vow. *Flying together — always.*

The cold, slow sound of Mother's clapping heels on the stone floor, warmed up by Mrs. Potter's *Whatever happens, wherever life takes you both, you are always welcome in my home.*

James's *I wish — I wish I could only see the good in you* pulling weight against his mother's words — *you're good, Regulus* .

Bellatrix's delirious smile as she was about to poke through his mind, balanced by James's actual, sunlit smirk, accompanied by *Can't help it. I can't decide which is better — waking up knowing we crushed Durmstrang or waking up next to you.*

The fear and shame of confessing to Isa, soothed by her laugh, drowsy and sprawled in his bed. *Who would've thought you were such a gentleman, Black?*

Cissy's words — *You kill someone* — and James's fury — *Oh, I do want to punch you* — all softened by Davies's quiet grace. *Don't be. I'm glad, Dora — I'm truly grateful I had the honour of meeting you. I will always, always be grateful for what we had.*

Thorne's plea, *Kill me, Regulus. Take your revenge*, steadied by Regulus's confession about James. *He sees the good in everything. And everyone.*

Davies's words, *they — oh, they raped her. Or… she made him rape her. She made him do it, over and over and over again*— living besides Regulus's own words, whispered to James, still inside him, *Fuck. I love*

you, James.

Sirius's plea, *Leave them, Reg. Before it's too late. They'll make you fight. You know that. One day, they'll make you kill,* outweighed by Mother's words, *Make me proud* , and his friends' fond smiles. *The golden boy.*

James's begging. *Don't join him, Reg. Don't fight, Reg. Don't fight* , and the rawness of his voice, *Would you — would you join him? While… having been with a boy? Having been with… me?* balanced by the loud applause, the whistles, the claps on his back by fellow Revolutionaries.

And then, James's words. *It's the most wonderful thing, Reg. When you laugh. And you deserve it. You deserve to laugh. You've had so much pain and hardship in your life and fuck, I just — I just want to make you laugh all day.*

So much love, so much warmth, sincerity and goodness in them that somehow they drowned out all the ache and pain they were meant to convey.

Yes. At some point, he came back to himself. At some point, the fog in his mind began to clear, shifting from full thunderheads to scattered clouds, so that he could think again. So he could steer again — steer his mind to where he wanted it the most.

To those moments where his gut was trying to tell him something, to warn him. Where his subconscious was trying to reach out and show him that he needed to pay attention, needed to sharpen himself, needed to *understand* —

"At some point this year, I may require you to retrieve information. Certain books, from certain libraries."

Yes — he remembered. Remembered the meeting over the summer holidays at Bellatrix's, and how the Dark Lord had requested to speak with him alone after. Remembered how strange, and scary, it was to be alone with the Dark Lord for the first time.

"It will all become clear in time," the Dark Lord continued. "But in that regard — and in regard to your mission at Hogwarts generally — you have another important task."

"I want you to stay close to Horace Slughorn."

Yes, he remembered perfectly — and it was now, in this bed in the

guest room at the Notts, Merlin knew how long deep into this Ritual, that he realised something chilling.

The Dark Lord had never returned to it — never mentioned the books again, never asked him about libraries.

And then — like a maelstrom breaking open in his mind — the puzzle pieces he hadn't even known existed began to whirl together, fast and violent, until they fell into place.

The first piece was the second time he'd been alone with the Dark Lord. Regulus had been surveilling with Yaxley and Mr. Nott when He'd suddenly appeared, and, once again, requested for a private moment with Regulus. And again, it seemed that he had sought him out for nothing but small talk. His initial memory had left it at that — had left it at nothing but a question about how Hogwarts had been and some praise about Regulus's performance in Provence.

But now, something else took its place in his mind. Something else clicked into place in his memory.

"There is a particular volume in the Hogwarts library I need access to. Hidden in the Restricted Section. Dumbledore has sealed certain shelves — I believe some of the knowledge I seek may be there."

Regulus nodded slowly, hesitant. "Do you… know what it's called?"

"Yes," the Dark Lord said, lips curling faintly. "It deals with the soul. With what can be done to it… and how it may be… safeguarded. You are to create a plausible excuse — something Slughorn would believe — a scholarly interest, a project…. And, naturally, you are to keep this secret. From everyone."

Of course Regulus had agreed. Of course he had.

He remembered nodding, his mind reeling and telling himself he'd understand it better later. That it would make sense once he saw the books.

And then his thoughts leapt to that soirée in Slughorn's office — where he'd been the only one from his friends attending. Where Mr. Maddock — Mr. Crouch's colleague — had shown up and Evans had been so entertaining. Where he'd even shared a few private words with her.

But now, with the fog lifting, he remembered what came after.

Remembered that he hadn't left with the others but had instead lingered, hung back — and somehow ended up alone with Professor Slughorn.

"Ah, my boy, curfew's nearly here — shouldn't you be heading off as well?"

Regulus took a deep breath.

"Well, I… actually have a bit of a situation, Professor."

Slughorn's expression softened with immediate concern. "Yes? What is it?"

Regulus hesitated only a moment before beginning, voice measured. "With my mother's illness, it's been… a difficult few months. I find it helps to focus on something. And I thought, perhaps, a project — something to dive into. Curse-breaking, actually. The art and theory behind it. I think it's fascinating."

Slughorn lit up, as expected. "Ambitious as always! I do wish more of my students had your drive, dear boy — you have a bright future ahead of you, you know."

Regulus smiled.

"Yes, well… I was hoping to turn it into a sort of… library project. There's just one problem — a lot of the material I need is in the Restricted Section."

"Oh, I can give you a note for Madame Leaf," Slughorn said at once, already reaching for his quill.

"Yes — but," Regulus had said carefully, "it might be… rather exhausting for you, Professor, if I had to ask permission for every individual book…"

Slughorn paused, quill hovering in the air, then lowered it slowly.

"Yes… yes, I see your point. Well, I shall speak to Madame Leaf personally and ensure she understands you have full access to anything you might need."

And then another night surfaced in his mind, another memory long erased. He remembered walking alone to the library, under the excuse of a late study session. Remembered pulling a book from the shelf. *Runic Foundations of Severance and Binding in Early European Magic.*

He had opened it under candlelight in the library, flipping through

chapters he barely understood. The Dark Lord had instructed him to find and copy anything related to soul-splitting, and eventually, in chapter thirteen, he had found a paragraph — brief and dense — about the ritualistic anchoring of a soul fragment via rune-circle binding.

He hadn't understood a word of it. But he had copied it down anyway. Word for word, symbol for symbol. And folded the parchment into a coded envelope to deliver to the Dark Lord over the Christmas holidays.

And then, suddenly, Isa's words made sense.

"Oh, which reminds me — Madame Leaf asked me to tell you to return two books before the holidays."

Regulus frowned. "I've already returned everything."

"She said otherwise." Isa shrugged. "You know how meticulous she is. Something about a book on Charms and one on the Living Draught of the Dead."

Regulus vaguely recalled seeing those titles in his dorm and found it odd that he hadn't really noticed them before.

"Wait up," he said. "I'll join you in a bit."

Because he had indeed borrowed two other books that evening, but as the memory had been erased from his mind, so his recollection of these two books had vanished.

And now, suddenly, that other round of supposed small talk after the meeting over the Christmas holidays made sense, too. Because it wasn't another round of small talk — no, it was the Dark Lord asking Regulus to get a specific passage out of a book from the Notts' library. And now, too, the request by Mr. Nott made sense.

"I meant to tell you," he said, catching Regulus's gaze. "Vivienne and I expect you to escort Dora to the Ball."

It was all orchestrated by the Dark Lord — he had somehow coaxed Mr. Nott into pressuring Regulus to accompany Isa to the Ball, so that he'd have the opportunity to snoop around in the Notts' library. And indeed, the memory slammed into place — instead of meeting Isa straight away in the Entrance Hall, he had snuck into the library and pulled out a heavy book titled *The Limitless Self: Magical Multiplicity in*

High Ritual.

Again, he had been tasked to search for anything about soul splitting. And again, he had found something — a passage buried in the seventh chapter, *Partition of the Spiritus* , discussing multiple soul fractures and the moral and magical degradation that followed each division.

He hadn't understood it. Not then. Had no idea why he was being asked to sift through these obscure books for splinters of information that made no sense to him.

No, it wasn't until later that he'd understand.

He thought back to that awkward, slow afternoon of surveillance with Mr. Nott, after the night he'd spent with Isa — and how, once again, the Dark Lord had appeared. And once again, under the guise of meaningless small talk.

Only it wasn't meaningless at all. No, instead it was another request. A request for yet another book — this time from the Rosiers' private collection.

Yes, the memories were rising like floodwater now, and although they came with new questions, so much was suddenly making sense too.

Regulus had found it so strange that he'd been asked to attend that routine meeting after the Hohenhain Breach — Regulus knew he was hardly crucial to these meetings and they risked a lot by having him leave Hogwarts and attend. And Regulus had found it strange, too, that it took place at Evan's house instead of at Bellatrix or Cissy.

But now he understood why. It was so that he could find that last piece of information hidden in the deepest corner of the Rosiers' library. Again, Regulus had been instructed to collect a book — *Of Things That Will Not Die*. However, this time, the instructions had been different.

Do not open it. Do not copy anything. Deliver the book whole.

After the meeting, Regulus had lingered as the others departed. The Dark Lord had asked him to stay. And in the dark drawing room of the Rosier estate, Regulus had handed over the book. But the Dark Lord hadn't simply taken it and sent him away. No — he had invited him to stay for a drink.

He'd just been starting to process the fact that it was so utterly strange

to have a *drink* with the leader of the Revolution, when the Dark Lord asked him a question which was so unnerving that he forgot about it altogether.

"Regulus," the Dark Lord said, lifting the book slightly in one hand. "Tell me honestly. Have you truly not opened this book?"

Regulus's eyes widened. "No — of course not, my Lord. I swear, I haven't —"

"I believe you," the Dark Lord said, cutting him off with an almost gentle smile.

But something about it had been wrong. Not the question — not even the interruption — but the ease of the acceptance, the certainty in his voice.

And then, Regulus saw it: the Dark Lord's eyes flicking, just briefly, toward Regulus's drink.

Veritaserum.

He had been drugged.

Regulus tried not to react. Tried to keep his face smooth, grateful, blank. But something inside him twisted — sharp and bitter. Maybe it was that irritation, or maybe the lingering glow of praise from his role at Hohenhain, but something in him stirred — something that gave him courage.

A fragile, reckless courage.

And so, he had asked a question — a question that, even now, as he relived it from this Ritual-drenched bed in the Notts' guest room, seemed impossibly bold.

"…Why are you asking me to collect all these things?" he said, carefully — cautiously.

The Dark Lord studied him for a moment. "Have you made sense of any of the information so far?"

Regulus hesitated. "Not really. Only that it all seems… connected. To soul splitting."

"Yes," the Dark Lord said quietly. "Very good."

A brief silence followed.

Regulus's voice was tentative. "Why would someone… split their soul?"

The Dark Lord leaned back slightly, his fingers resting on the cover of the book. "So that they cannot die."

Regulus blinked. "Immortality?"

The Dark Lord's eyes glinted. "The spellwork is ancient. Difficult. And very dark. But yes — if done properly, it renders the soul tethered to the living world, even if the body is destroyed."

He let that sit for a moment before adding, softly: "It is called a Horcrux."

The word sent a strange shiver down Regulus's spine. Something in it felt… wrong. Rotten, even.

Regulus swallowed. "It seems… hard. To do something like that."

The Dark Lord's smile returned, cold and private. "Of course it is. That is the price of greatness."

There was another pause. Regulus didn't know what possessed him next — maybe that same invisible thread of bravery.

"Would you?" he asked. "Would you consider it?"

The Dark Lord laughed.

And Regulus, now — here, lying in bed with these memories crashing into him like waves — realised why. The laugh hadn't been mocking. It had been… pleased. Confident, certain.

Because the Dark Lord had already known Regulus wouldn't remember any of this. Because he had planned to Obliviate him.

And so he had confessed.

"I have, Regulus," he'd said. "I have considered it — four times, even."

Regulus's heart went still. His mouth parted, breath catching.

"…What?" he whispered.

The Dark Lord's gaze turned distant, thoughtful. "Each time, I was inspired by someone great. A founder. A visionary. A sorcerer whose legacy I respected. And so, I've placed them in places I trust the most."

Regulus said nothing — *could* say nothing. His mind had begun to spiral. He desperately needed to calm his dread, to ease his heartbeat. He needed something concrete, something simple to distract himself, to calm himself down.

"…Why couldn't I open this one?" he asked, quietly. "Why did I have to bring it to you directly?"

The Dark Lord looked at him for a long moment. Then he laughed — a dark, dry sound that scraped down Regulus's spine like a cold blade.

"Ah. Although I know you won't be a threat — not with what's coming — I still cannot risk anyone reading this book."

Regulus understood. In that instant, he understood. The Dark Lord would wipe the memory from his mind — all of it.

The Dark Lord's voice softened, almost a whisper now. "This is the only book that tells how to destroy a Horcrux."

He ran a hand lightly across the cover.

"And now I have it. And I will get rid of it."

Chapter End Notes

Soooo there we go! I hope this wasn't anticlimatic as - well - WE know about the Horcruxes. For Reg it's really a big reveal, though, and we'll see how that works out in the next chapters ;)

This was an insanely difficult chapter to write btw - to merge the now and then, to bring all the clues together, to make memories and the current sort of... flow naturally etc. so I really hope that it turned out well.

Let me know what you think and, as always, lots of love! x

Chapter 25: Of Rings & Camps

Chapter Notes

> Ommmmg somehow I feel like this took way too long, then I checked and it's only been a little over a week? Still, I raised the bar impossibly high with the two (long) chapters every week that I've been writing the last two months or so. I do however apologise for not really having/keeping up with a schedule. I know that's way nicer but I just can't really commit right now.
>
> Anyhow, without further ado, the next chapter! The last chapter and epilogue (and thus end of this work!) will be uploaded in a week or so, too.
>
> Thank you all so much for your comments on the last chapter and the kudos everyone's leaving. It means the world to me, truly! I will be responding to comments quickly.
>
> Lots of love xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Staying over at the Notts' after the Ritual was, without a doubt, one of the most awkward things Regulus had ever done. If Mr. Nott had kept his word — and Regulus was quite certain he had — he hadn't breathed a word to Mrs Nott about the ordeal. Still, she naturally knew something was going on and had probably managed to connect it to the marriage negotiations. The curiosity practically radiated off her.

At the same time, both Isa and her father kept throwing a strange mix of concerned and surprised glances at him, as if they were surprised he hadn't broken yet and were waiting for him to fall to pieces still. They believed, after all, that Regulus had subjected himself to the Ritual in order to face that dark trauma from his past — a past he desperately wished his future in-laws knew nothing about. Just the thought of that conversation between Isa's parents in the library in Damascus — the perfect venue, apparently, for dissecting his years of abuse — made his skin crawl.

So it was with a discomfort bordering on physical nausea that he sat down for breakfast the following morning. He had, to his own credit, already accounted for the possibility that he'd need to stay over. Barty

and Evan had returned to the Rosiers' estate instead of staying at Black Manor, and although another concerned look exchanged between Isa and her father made Regulus want to stab his poached eggs, he realised that, logistically speaking, things were actually working out rather well.

Staying at the Notts' meant access to their library. Barty and Evan staying with the Rosiers gave Regulus an excuse to visit *their* library as well.

Because he had to check. He *had* to copy everything he'd passed on to the Dark Lord and confirm that the Rosier book — *Of Things That Will Not Die* — had indeed not been returned. He'd try to make sense of it all after. Try to come up with a plan, an idea — *something* — after he'd gathered all the pieces.

Not that he needed much more information at this point. No — the most important revelation had already been handed to him by the Dark Lord himself.

But still. He wanted time. Time to think, to breathe. Time to postpone the terrifying, paralysing reality that he might actually need to do something with the things he had learned.

Horcruxes. Not one. Not two. Not three. *Four* Horcruxes. The Dark Lord had split his soul into *five* parts to grant himself immortality.

What did that *mean*? What did it say about the man Regulus had sworn loyalty to? And — terrifyingly — what did it require of Regulus now that he knew?

Fuck. What was he supposed to do?

No. Not now. He couldn't spiral now — not while trying to get some food down, not while Ariadna and Elara chattered on about ants and dragon lilies and whatever else they were currently studying. Not while Isa and Mr. Nott were watching his every move, and *certainly* not while he tried to assure Mrs. Nott that her daughter was to get engaged to the calm, collected heir to the noble House of Black and not some unstable lunatic.

He forced his mind to focus on the important matter at hand, on the first step in all of this — the library.

"Did you finish your essay on compound human-animal Transfigurations?" he asked Isa casually, keeping his tone light.

Isa nodded, her voice as sour as her eyes at the memory. “Yes. It was *awful*.”

He smiled faintly. “I know — that’s why I haven’t finished it yet. I thought about including some material on spell-resistance in hybrid forms, but couldn’t find anything decent in my own library.”

As if by accident, he let his eyes flick towards Mr. Nott — who, predictably, took the bait like a trained falcon.

“You should have a look through ours,” he said, lifting his tea. “There’s a few good volumes on advanced human Transfiguration.”

Regulus nodded, schooling his expression. “That would be brilliant, thank you.”

*****

An hour later, Regulus was in the library.

He had managed to shake Isa off near the Divination aisle and headed straight to the section he remembered from the Ritual. Pulling the right volume from the shelf, he quickly copied the relevant pages onto his own parchment and resumed his seat at a writing table, feigning deep engagement with his essay just as Isa was called downstairs by her mother.

The information wasn’t new, but it still felt good to have it in front of him. To have it on parchment. Something solid, something real.

It also struck him that this was the perfect chance to look around a bit more. Even though the library at their estate in Damascus was easily twice the size of this one, there was still a decent chance he’d find something on soul magic — or immortality, perhaps. So he set to the task, weaving through the rows of high shelves, fingers trailing over the worn spines of books on memory modification, necromancy, ancient runes… anything that might hint at soul-splitting.

He was so focused he barely noticed when Mr. Nott entered.

The older man didn’t speak at first, but Regulus caught the glint of suspicion in his eyes as he wandered closer.

“Looking for something in particular?”

Regulus shook his head, trying to sound as casual as possible. “Not

really. I just find things with souls interesting — soul binding, soul-splitting…"

Mr. Nott nodded, stepping closer to the aisle. "You and the rest of the world, I'd wager. You'll find a few books, but not much. Soul magic's… tricky business."

Regulus nodded. "Yeah, I figured. Still — you've an exquisite library."

Mr. Nott smiled. "Thank you. Though as for what you're after, I doubt you'll find much of it in any European collection."

Regulus tilted his head slightly, prompting him to go on.

"The Bedouins are known for it," Mr. Nott said. "Some sects, anyway. Old texts — desert-born, you might say — that explore soul binding, disintegration, all of it, in far more explicit detail than anything you'll see here."

Regulus blinked. "The Bedouins… as in, the Arabian Peninsula?"

Mr. Nott gave a short, dry laugh. "Ah — no. The Maghreb. They've been keepers of very old knowledge. But most of it's been seized over the years — confiscated by governments and locked away in their private collections."

Regulus nodded, taking it in.

Mr. Nott moved towards the large desk tucked into the corner. Regulus was just about to thank him and excuse himself when something caught his eye.

A ring.

It looked… familiar.

It was delicate, slightly old-fashioned. Silver with a pale gemstone — the sort of thing a woman would wear. Not Mrs. Nott, though, for she only wore her wedding band. It couldn't be Isa's either, for all her jewellery was gold.

Then why did it look so familiar?

And *why* was it on Mr. Nott's desk?

Sensing his gaze, Mr. Nott gave a faint, amused sound.

“Ah,” he said. “Long time no see, I suppose.”

Regulus frowned. “Do I… do I recognise that?”

“You should,” Mr. Nott replied dryly. “You’re the one who chopped it off.”

And then it slammed into him.

The ring.

Professor Valaine’s ring. The one she always wore — the one that had still been on her hand when he severed it during the final moments at Hohenhain.

His stomach turned.

Mr. Nott gave a small shrug. “I pocketed it. I don’t really know why. It’s not valuable, it doesn’t mean anything to me… But I couldn’t quite bring myself to throw it away either.”

Regulus hesitated. “Could I—” He cleared his throat. “Could I have it?”

Mr. Nott raised an eyebrow.

“As a… reminder,” Regulus said quietly. “Of Hohenhain. Of what we accomplished.”

There was a pause, but then Mr. Nott gave a dry huff. He slid the ring across the desk.

“Well, yes. Why not. A little souvenir.”

Regulus was fairly certain the ring truly meant nothing to Mr. Nott. But as he turned it over in his hand, thumb brushing lightly over the tiny inscription — *V.C.T.* — something inside him stirred.

Something told him the ring would prove to be very valuable indeed.

And on that, Regulus would turn out to be right.

*****

Returning to Hogwarts was both unnerving and a relief.

Regulus had prepared himself for several outcomes after the Ritual.

He could've gone insane. He could have — perhaps somewhat ironically — lost parts of his memory in a trauma response. His body could have shut down altogether. He had prepared for many scenarios, but none of them had come to pass.

Where Mr. Nott and Isa had feared the Ritual might destroy him, Regulus had known better. He had, after all, built a tolerance for reliving trauma.

What he hadn't accounted for, though, was the after — the sensory aftermath, the disorientation. The way reliving every vivid, razor-sharp moment of his life seemed to have rewired something in his brain, or maybe his soul. Everything now suddenly looked different, as if he was seeing the world through newly cut glass. He *knew* it was the same, yet it felt so… different.

His perception was skewed, heightened. Colours were too bright, sounds too sharp. Emotions — even the fleeting, smallest ones — surged through him raw and with violence. It was like his nervous system had been flayed open and was still waiting to close again. Everything came at him too much, too fast, too deep.

It made him agitated and very easily overwhelmed — something which was very unfortunate as there was now more to think about than ever before. So much more to consider, to ponder over, to dread…

They said knowledge was power.

Regulus, now more than ever, disagreed.

Knowledge didn't bring power — it brought paralysis. It stripped away the illusion of freedom. It didn't empower; it *disarmed* . There was nothing noble, nothing liberating, about the knowledge the Ritual had given him. It was suffocating, heavy. It was a lead cloak around his shoulders.

Because now he knew.

What was he supposed to do with it? What kind of plan was he meant to make? What choices *could* he make, now that he understood what the Dark Lord had done?

No. Never in his life had Regulus felt so powerless. With the weight of the world as they knew it literally on his shoulder, he felt nothing but pressure pushing him down, down into the earth he knew, more than

ever, needed saving.

The truth will set you free.

What utter rubbish. He had never felt less free. The truth hadn't set him free in the slightest — it had caged him. Locked him in, doomed him to carry knowledge he'd never asked for, and could never now unlearn.

He had gone over it again and again — all the potential scenarios, the logic, the motivations, the reasoning that might justify what the Dark Lord had done. He'd tried so hard to convince himself — to convince himself of the necessity of it all. Because, strategically speaking, it did tip the scales in their favour if their leader couldn't possibly die. Perhaps that way, the war effort could stretch infinitely forward, undefeatable.

But there were other ways — better ways. Other ways to build longevity, to ensure legacy. Knowledge could be passed on, leadership could be shared. The movement could have endured without ripping the fabric of the soul.

There was only one reason someone would do what he had done — and it had nothing to do with a war strategy of the effort to make the world a better place. Nothing to do with justice or salvation.

No. There could be only one reason the Dark Lord had chased immortality, and it wasn't good news.

Everyone saying knowledge was power or the truth set you free was a blatant fool. Because there was nothing better than ignorance. Ignorance wasn't bliss — it was a blessing, a divine mercy, granted to compensate for the curse of conscience.

"Are you *still* reading that book?"

Regulus's eyes snapped up. Isa stood before him in their corner of the common room, which was uncharacteristically deserted. She settled down on the sofa across from him, eyeing the book in Regulus's hands curiously.

"Rereading it, actually," he murmured, eyes flicking back to the page.

Isa leaned in to get a look at the title. "What's it about? If you're that obsessed with it, it must be something brilliant. Some political treatise? A philosophical work on leadership?"

Regulus let out a short, humourless laugh. “Not quite. It’s a fable, actually. About animals.”

Isa raised a brow, clearly not expecting *that*.

He couldn’t really blame her. It was only a short book — not even 130 pages — hardly something one would consider life changing or having any right to be as anchoring as it felt to Regulus.

But somehow he found solace in the words, solace in the story.

“It’s called *Animal Farm*,” he explained. “There’s a farm owned by a man named Mr. Jones, where the animals are mistreated — underfed, overworked, neglected. Eventually, three pigs start a revolution.”

Somehow, this part of the story reminded Regulus of the early days of their Revolution — Old Major’s impassioned speech about the animals’ enslavement, how rebellion was the only path to freedom. It wasn’t unlike the words Lucius had spoken in the Hog’s Head, or what Thorne had said in the Black drawing room, or what the Dark Lord had preached at the oval table in Bellatrix’s manor.

The wizarding world is in danger. The only way to save it is by returning to what made it strong. The old ways, the old blood. The establishment welcomes chaos — new ideas, new rules, new people. We must restore order before everything is lost, topple the regime, restore the strength of the community.

It had been enticing. It had been *thrilling*. They were going to save the world and Regulus would be part of it — from the very start.

“So they manage to drive out Mr. Jones,” he went on, “rename the place *Animal Farm* , and come up with these Seven Commandments — rules to structure their new society, all of them enhancing unity, solidarity, and most of all, equality.”

Isa nodded, intrigued now.

“The most important rule was the last one — *all animals are equal.*”

Regulus had thought about that commandment often. For many Revolutionaries, it was clear: not all witches and wizards were equal. There was a hierarchy — Purebloods, Half Bloods, Muggleborns and Muggles. Magic determined your worth.

But Regulus had never truly seen it that way. There was something to

be said for keeping the magical world intact and keeping these different groups separate — yes — but he had never considered blood status a matter of superiority. They were just different. Purebloods were different from Mudbloods — simple. Purebloods carried generations of magic, knowledge and tradition. Mudbloods were new to the magical world. Even the Selwyn twins could understand that these groups were different. And Regulus understood too that Mudbloods and Halfbloods brought in other ideas, different upbringings, a tide of modernisation that many found disorienting, even threatening.

But no, it didn't mean that people were *less* or *more* . So, in essence, Regulus agreed with the commandment. Though different, all people were equal.

Lately, though, it had begun to dawn on him that perhaps he was alone in thinking that.

He never treated Miller any differently, for example, although she was a Muggleborn. She was skilled, talented and disarmingly likeable. Regulus saw no reason not to befriend her. But the slurs, the cold shoulders and taunting from their fellow Housemates showed that he was clearly in the minority.

He knew none of them would understand his interest in Muggle philosophy, or his trips to the bookshops or his friendship with Marie-Anne. No, just the idea of telling a family member about him driving with a Muggle through London was absurd. He was sure Mother would die from a heart attack at the sight.

He knew that many people around him didn't think like he did. But what did that mean for him?

"What happens then?" Isa asked, pulling him out of his thoughts.

"Well," Regulus said, blinking, "for a while, things are good. The animals work together, grow food. Two pigs — Snowball and Napoleon — start leading. But there's tension. Snowball wants to modernise the farm while Napoleon doesn't. Eventually, Napoleon drives Snowball out."

"And then?"

Regulus paused. "Then it corrupts again. Napoleon consolidates power. Propaganda keeps everyone loyal. And slowly, the commandments — the very laws that were meant to protect them —

begin to change."

Was that what happened to the Dark Lord, too? Had he been nothing more than a passionate Revolutionary, but had the power gone to his head so much that he had chosen to split his soul into *five* pieces to grant himself immortality? Had he once truly believed in the cause — believed in change — before the power twisted him? Had he been just another revolutionary whose ambition rotted into obsession?

And what did that mean?

"Like, one rule says *no animal shall kill any other animal* — then they add *without cause.* Then *no animal shall sleep in a bed* , becomes *no animal shall sleep in a bed… with sheets.* The pigs start taking more privileges — drinking, moving into the farmhouse, and over time, the revolution fades into memory, until only one commandment remains."

Isa leaned in, visibly tense. "Which one?"

Regulus looked up. "*All animals are equal… but some animals are more equal than others.*"

Silence stretched between them. Isa sat back slowly, lips pressed together, clearly lost in thought.

"Do you think that's going to happen?" she finally asked. "With our revolution? That once we win, it'll just be… the same? All for nothing?"

Regulus sighed.

He didn't know. He didn't know what was true or false anymore. What was right or wrong.

He had joined the Revolution to *safeguard* magic, to protect the legacy of centuries, to make sure those values had a voice in the world's future. To stop the tide of modernism from washing away entire generations of magical heritage.

But the more he thought about it now, the less he believed that was what they were really fighting for. The revelation about the Dark Lord had changed something, had shifted the lens through which Regulus saw everything. Had made him question things he had once believed without hesitation.

The Revolution no longer felt like a war for tradition. It felt like a war

for power, a war for control. A war driven not by preservation, but by conquest. By the hunger to *win* .

They were all told they were fighting for a cause, but the Dark Lord clearly had one of his own. That truth alone was hard enough to swallow — to realise the man Regulus had revered was carving a path not for the greater good, but for his own ambition.

But that wasn't the worst of it. The part Regulus truly couldn't come to terms with — the part that twisted in his gut — was the betrayal.

Because that's what it was.

He had been used.

The Dark Lord — the man Regulus had admired, revered, followed — had used him. He had become yet another figure Regulus had trusted, believed in, only to be betrayed by.

He had used Regulus for his personal agenda. Had used Regulus for his connections.

The Dark Lord couldn't risk being seen scouring fellow Revolutionaries' libraries for information about soul splitting and preservation — he did not have the luxury of anonymity, after all. But no one would ask questions if a sixteen-year old boy, already a child at home at the Notts and Rosiers, was rummaging through their book shelves. No one would ask questions if Regulus, with twelve O.W.L. Oustandings, perfect discipline and a reputation for academic excellence, started another research project at Hogwarts. Of course Slughorn would grant him — the Heir of the Noble and Ancient House of Black — carte blanche in the Restricted Section.

So Regulus had done the work, had found what the Dark Lord needed. And once he had served his purpose, he'd been Obliviated. Memories, parts of himself, erased with a simple flick of a wand. His being reduced to a tool, a vessel, and nothing more. It violated everything Regulus believed about loyalty and meaning.

Regulus felt ashamed, humiliated, utterly hollow. He thought back of that laugh — that dark, dry laugh when revealing his plan to Regulus. *I know you won't be a threat.*

He felt used, discarded, ashamed.

Not only because the Dark Lord had used him and had him Obliviated

— had parts of his memory, of *himself* erased just for his own benefit. But also because Regulus knew, deep down, that it hadn't even been necessary. He knew deep down that if the Dark Lord had asked him to keep this a secret, he would have. A simple question and he would have taken that secret to the grave, would have endured torture before betraying him.

And that — *that* — made it the worst betrayal of all.

And Regulus had no idea what to do with that.

*****

The weeks between Easter and the end of the school year passed in a haze.

Easter had fallen late that year, which meant only two months remained — two months crammed with classes, Quidditch Captaincy, extra Potions sessions, and relentless, gnawing debates in his mind. Debates about the world. Debates about what he'd uncovered during the Ritual. Debates about what-ifs, if-nots, and what-nows.

Yes, even with his schedule stretched to its limit and his mind forcibly fixed on the looming end-of-year exams, Regulus found himself consumed — alarmedly so — by his discoveries and the state of the wizarding world.

Outside the castle, the Minchum administration passed on with its insistent pretence that everything was under control — that nothing of note was happening, despite the flurry of minor attacks and the shadow of Hohenhain still fresh in everyone's minds. The *Daily Prophet* had not yet fallen fully under Ministry control; letters from concerned readers were still being published almost daily, voicing their growing unease with the government's refusal to be transparent. More and more people, it seemed, were beginning to question the official line.

Still, on the last Saturday before exam season began, it wasn't the tests, the coursework, politics or even the extracurricular Potions classes occupying Regulus's thoughts.

It was Quidditch.

He stood in the locker room, broom in hand, just minutes before the final match of the season.

And not just any match — *the* match. The one that would decide the

House Cup.

If they beat Hufflepuff by more than 250 points, Slytherin would win the Cup. If they won by less or lost altogether, Gryffindor would take it.

Normally, the final game of the year was played between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, but James had requested a swap. With so many O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. students in both houses, he argued it would be better to play their final match earlier, freeing up time to focus on revision. Naturally, Regulus and the Hufflepuff Captain had been asked for their consent — and both had agreed.

Now, Regulus drew a breath and swept his eyes across his team.

They all looked sharp — focused. Not as jittery as they'd been before previous matches. Even Miller wore a fierce expression, jaw set with an edge that was new and sharp. She was finally seeing her worth and the sight of it filled Regulus with pride.

"Alright, team," he said. "It's now or never. More than 250 points and the Cup is ours. Less, and we hand it to Gryffindor. We've worked hard — and we're bloody good. We *can* do this. Stick to the strategy, keep your heads, and there's no reason we won't be lifting that Cup tonight!"

A chorus of cheers and shouted encouragement rang out, echoing off the walls of the changing room.

Outside, the noise from the stands was deafening — a roar of anticipation. The sky above was tense, electric. Practically every student had turned out to watch — even the swots had peeled themselves away from their books for this.

James wasn't waiting for him outside the changing room this time, but Regulus found him in the crowd almost instantly. His hair was its usual mess, his fingers dragging through it in a nervous tic. Their eyes locked across the pitch.

And for just a moment, the roar of the crowd faded. The world fell away.

Regulus saw only James — those familiar hazel eyes, that crooked, knowing smile. A silent message passed between them.

You've got this, Reg. Make me proud.

It hit Regulus squarely in the chest. That this — *this* — was what James's face said, despite the fact that Slytherin winning meant Gryffindor losing their last and only shot at the Cup… it did something to him. Something warm and aching, fuzzy and sad all at once.

He swallowed it down, tore his gaze away, and kicked off into the air.

Hufflepuff played exactly as they'd expected. Their Beaters were hopeless, but their Chasers were solid, so Lively struggled to keep up. Thankfully, Miller was on fire, compensating with sharp, aggressive play and scoring goal after goal.

Still, it wasn't easy.

Nearly two hours in, Regulus knew he'd need more than skill. He'd need luck — maybe even divine intervention — to spot the Snitch at the *right* time, when they were at least ten goals ahead of Hufflepuff. With the scoreline bouncing back and forth, and the Hufflepuff and Slytherin Chasers matching each other almost evenly, it felt nearly impossible.

He could blame it on exhaustion, he could blame it on nerves or on stress from everything he'd been carrying the past few weeks.

But, in the end, it didn't matter.

They were seventy points ahead when he saw it — the glint of gold near the far goalpost. Just three goals short of what they needed. Too soon. If he caught it now, it would seal their victory in the match — but lose them the Cup.

And yet, instead of cursing the timing or hesitating, Regulus thought of James. James, with that lopsided smile. James, in the stands, eyes full of belief. *Make me proud.* James — who, through everything, had never once let him down. Regulus thought of him, of the Scouts who'd come to see James play. Of how much that Cup might mean to his future. His dream. About how he would not ever begrudge Regulus winning that match, even if winning it would mean so much to himself.

And without a second's thought — not even a *first* — Regulus reached out and closed his fingers around the Snitch.

Slytherin had won the match. But Gryffindor had won the Cup.

*****

“Sorry, team,” Regulus said, rubbing the back of his neck, eyes cast low. “I know it was too early. Wasn’t enough for us to win the Cup—”

“No, Cap,” Miller cut in immediately, her voice firm. “You were right. We were nearly three hours in, everyone was knackered, and Hufflepuff kept matching our goals. We couldn’t have held out forever.”

Lively nodded from where he was slumped on the bench, still catching his breath. “I’d rather have won this match and lost the Cup than lost both.”

Regulus gave a small nod, trying to feel grateful for their understanding — and he was, truly — but the guilt still settled heavy in his gut. He couldn't shake the feeling that he’d let his team mates, his house, down.

Yes, if he had to do it again, he probably would. Emotionally, it had felt right. Worth it, even. But practically, he’d made a choice that cost his team the Cup, and well — it *stung* .

“Go on,” he said quietly. “Get cleaned up and have dinner. There’s still a party in the common room tonight.”

A few nodded as they filed out, some clapping him on the shoulder in passing. Miller was the last to leave, pausing in the doorway just long enough to offer a reassuring smile before disappearing, too.

Regulus exhaled slowly, crouched to gather his kit, and had just started unlacing his boots when the door creaked open behind him.

He didn’t look up. He didn’t need to. He knew exactly who it was.

James was leaning against the wall, one foot pressed flat to it, arms crossed, gaze somewhere far-off. His face was unreadable — lost in thought, or perhaps just trying to make sense of things.

Regulus glanced away, sat down, and began to lace his shoes with careful fingers.

A tense silence stretched between them.

It was James who broke it.

“Did you do that on purpose?”

Regulus looked up, eyebrow raised. “What?”

“Did you catch the Snitch too early on purpose?”

Regulus let out a quiet sigh. He knew that if he answered honestly, James would never let himself enjoy the win. That he’d feel as though the Cup wasn’t properly earned. He would probably go and hand it back if given half a chance, because that was just how bloody noble and righteous he was.

“It was impulsive,” Regulus said instead. “We’d been playing for hours. I didn’t have a solid idea of the score…”

James studied him, brow furrowed, clearly not convinced.

“Aren’t you… pissed?” he asked, a bit awkwardly.

Regulus gave a quiet huff. Lively’s words echoed in his mind. “Would’ve dragged it out for nothing, probably,” he said. “Might’ve been the best we were going to get.”

James arched another brow — sceptical, but he didn’t push.

“You were brilliant, though,” he said after a beat, voice softer. He ruffled his hair in that absent, nervous way of his.

His gaze drifted — to the way James’s arms looked tanned and lean in a T-shirt instead of robes, to the way his large hands fidgeted at the seams of his jeans, to the slight scuff on his trainers, like he’d been pacing.

His throat went dry.

“Thanks,” he managed, rough and too quiet.

Another silence fell, their eyes catching — and holding — long enough for the air between them to spark and shift.

“I’ll — I’ll leave you to it,” James said finally, clearing his throat. He gave a small nod, like he’d just agreed with something in his own head.

Regulus couldn’t bring himself to speak. He just nodded once, sharply, and watched James turn and leave without another word.

*****

The seeds had been planted long ago — and by many hands.

His appalment at Legot's fate. Baran Demir. The woman in Bellatrix's basement. The fate of Nathaniel Davies if Regulus hadn't broke him free. Thorne's plea — *kill me, Regulus* . The lusting eyes of Rabastan Lestrange and Antonin Dolohov on Isa. Dolohov, dropping *dead* in front of him. Bellatrix's endless, sick and sadistic games. Markus Wenger, his wife Elise, his children Klara and Léonie. The Horcruxes. *They'll never accept it… someone who… loves differently.*

And yet, in the end, it was something far simpler that tipped the scale. Just a short conversation with Sirius.

Despite exams looming and half the Potions class consumed with their N.E.W.T.s, they still had to tend to the Felix Felicis. It had reached the final stages of its months-long brew. Over the past few months, Regulus had been teamed up with Evans, Amaryllis and Isa. Mercifully, he'd managed to avoid being paired with either James or Sirius — until now. Of course.

His life wouldn't be his life if he hadn't been assigned to check the potion one last time — just over two weeks before the holidays — with his brother.

And Sirius wouldn't be Sirius if he didn't take the opportunity to dive into that issue that had divided them to the core, that had sent them down opposing paths. Sirius was known to be stubborn after all, and for him, there was no such thing as a lost cause, especially when it came to his brother.

He also wouldn't be Sirius Black if he didn't feel the need to fill every silence with relentless chatter first — in this case, about his plans after Hogwarts.

"We're going to look at flats in London," Sirius said casually, swirling a stirrer through the air. "Moony, Wormtail, Prongs and I."

Regulus hummed noncommittally, eyes still fixed on the swirling gold in the cauldron. Two slow, counter-clockwise stirs.

"Peter floated some nonsense about a magical village — Hogsmeade or Godric's Hollow — but we're thinking Muggle London."

Regulus snorted faintly. "That'll be fun."

Sirius rolled his eyes but smirked. "Would've suited you, honestly. Bet

there's loads of bookshops round there. You'd have a field day."

Regulus shot him a flat look.

Sirius sighed. Regulus knew that sigh, knew exactly where this conversation was heading.

"How does that work, Reg?" Sirius asked. "How can you follow all that pure-blood supremacy rubbish while actually… enjoying so much Muggle stuff?"

Regulus arched a brow. "Reading a few Muggle books hardly qualifies as 'enjoying so much Muggle stuff'."

"Still," Sirius pressed, undeterred. "Bet you're the only one. I bet dear Mother would drop dead on the spot if she saw you reading Shakespeare."

Against himself, Regulus snorted at the mental image. But then again, he was fairly certain he'd done worse than reading some Muggle classics. Like doing the only son of the wizarding world's most notorious blood traitors.

Reprimanding himself because there were definitely more suitable moments to think about Sirius's best friend, naked above him and whispering sweet nothings in his ear, he physically shook off the image. He turned to his brother who leaned easily against the desk.

"You can't *completely* align with them," Sirius said, softer now. "Not if you're still the person I thought you were."

Regulus was instantly annoyed, but he couldn't really pinpoint why — perhaps because the things Sirius was raising were too sensitive now, with everything going on and all the thoughts smothering him ever since the Ritual.

He snapped before he could stop himself.

"Well, I know I don't align with *Dumbledore*," he said sharply. "There's value in tradition, Sirius. In legacy. Generations of magic, protected and passed down. There's something to be said for that — for guarding against movements that try to tear it all down without understanding what they're destroying."

To his surprise, Sirius didn't immediately argue. He didn't sneer or scoff or call him a brainwashed idiot.

He just… paused. Thoughtful.

“Look,” he said eventually, voice softer now. “Sometimes… sometimes it’s not about being completely right or wrong. It’s about being the *most* right, or the *least* wrong, you know?”

Regulus blinked at him. He was too stunned by the fact that Sirius was actually *listening* to react.

“You can disagree with things from both sides,” Sirius went on, “but if the *most important* stuff — the real stuff — lines up more with one than the other, then… maybe that’s the side you ought to stand with. Even if it’s flawed, even if some things are messy.”

He paused, letting it hang in the air.

“I know you’ve never seen Muggles as inferior. I know you treat other creatures with respect — you’re practically friends with the House Elves. Miller’s one of your closest mates, and she’s a Muggleborn. So don’t tell me you believe blood status means anything.” He paused. “And if that’s true — if you know that deep down — aren’t those values worth protecting too? Alongside all the tradition you’re so keen to preserve?”

Silence fell between them, thicker than before.

Then Sirius shrugged, voice quiet but certain.

“Sometimes the world forces you to pick a camp when really, there should be ten, alright? And when it does — you choose the better one. Even if neither’s perfect.”

*****

And when it does — you choose the better one. Even if neither’s perfect.

Regulus lay flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling of his dormitory. He was alone, savouring the unusual silence of the room. His hands were folded on his stomach, still, except for the slight twitch of one finger.

He should’ve been reviewing for Transfiguration — the exam was tomorrow, after all — but he couldn’t concentrate. There was a restless, constant hum beneath his skin. Sirius’s words kept looping in his head, playing over and over until they bled into everything else.

Choose the better one… even if neither's perfect.

But which one was better?

There was the Revolution. The Traditionalists. The world he'd been born into, raised in. Regulus found pride in heritage, in generations of Pureblood traditions and values. And there were so many important people and factors there. There was Mother and her pride. *Make me proud, son* . There was Cissy, who had always had his back, who'd been there for him when no one else — not even Sirius or any adult in their lives who was supposed to — had managed.

He had friends in that camp. Barty, Evan… Undoubtedly to be branded with the Mark over the summer holidays. And, perhaps most importantly, there was Isa… Isa, despite her own reservations and issues with their world, being the epitome of traditionalism. The eldest Nott — the estates, the regal gowns, the intellect. And, of course, soon to be Regulus's spouse.

And then there were the Modernists. Modernists who were, as a rule, more open to new ideas and influences and to *everyone who loves differently*… The Potters were there — Mr. and Mrs. Potter, who had been so welcoming and warm to him. So unconditionally kind. And there was Sirius, his brother, for whom he longed so much. And then there was James… The only person he had ever loved — and the only one he ever would.

But there was also Dumbledore. There were also radicals there, going against so much Regulus stood for. Going against Pureblood society and values…

And where did that leave Regulus? Where did he stand after all he had done? After having killed. After taking the Mark?

Was there even a choice left?

He had *never* felt there was a choice. Had never felt there was a chance to deviate from his path. Had felt that everything had been carved out for him in stone. But something had shifted after the Ritual. Maybe — just maybe — stone wasn't always hard. Maybe paths weren't always straight or clear.

At least he hoped.

But what did it mean to deviate? What did it mean to change course? What did it mean to throw away the stones he'd inherited and pick up

different ones, strange and unfamiliar?

You choose the better one. Even if neither's perfect.

Still… even if the other camp *was* the better one, he couldn't leave Isa. Couldn't leave her to fend for herself. No, he could never betray her like that.

Regulus sighed.

There was only one way forward. He alone had the information. He alone could act. And maybe — just maybe — if he played it right, he wouldn't have to leave Isa at all. Could still protect her even if he did the things that felt so enormous, so overwhelming, so utterly terrifying.

Regulus turned his head and stared at his hand, at the ring.

He turned it slowly between his fingers, tracing the familiar, delicate engraving.

V.C.T.

And then something clicked. A spark, small but electric.

It should all start with the ring. If his instincts were right, if that voice inside was telling him the truth, then this was the best way forward — the only way, with all the cursed cards he'd been dealt.

Yes, it would start with the ring.

He had a letter to send.

Chapter End Notes

Yesss, tides are turning, winds are shifting, new dawns are breaking...

There's still some things happening before we wrap up this book, though. I have a feeling you will like the next chapter ;)

Let me know what you all think!

Chapter 26: Of Finals & Goodbyes

Chapter Notes

> Aah, I tried to upload this before the weekend so you'd all have something to read, but it didn't quite work out, so now you'll all have something to read for the week, I guess ;)
>
> It's a long chapter (almost 11k) and as always I considered dividing it in two, but I didn't know where etc. so now it's just one very long chapter.
>
> Can't believe we're almost there... Only the epilogue left. I'll upload that one somewhere this week too. I'm so curious what you guys think!
>
> Thank you so much for your comments and kudos, it's really validating and motivating and it's so nice to see people are enjoying this. As always, lots of love! x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Please tell me why this school is punishing us with *another* stiff-arsed ball,” Isa moaned, dramatically flopping backwards into the armchair like it had personally offended her.

“I think it’s meant to be a gift, actually,” Melania corrected, perched neatly on the armrest. “A celebration, remember? End of exams, end of the year—”

“Well,” Isa cut in darkly, “if this is Dumbledore’s idea of a celebration, I dread to imagine his birthdays.”

Barty looked up from where he was lounging upside-down on the sofa, feet kicking against the wall. “Oh come on, Nott. It’s hardly like one of your stiff balls — there’s going to be music, spiked drinks…”

“That doesn’t change the fact,” Isa said flatly, sitting up, “that we’re expected to ballroom dance for at least the first hour and a half.”

Barty smirked. “You mean to tell me you *don’t* want to waltz with me, Nott?”

Isa arched a brow. “As if you can actually waltz, Crouch.”

“Try me, then!” Barty cried, springing to his feet and striking a ludicrously elegant pose, one hand extended toward her with theatrical flair.

Isa looked, for a moment, torn between indulging him and sinking deeper into the chair. Then, with a dramatic sigh, she took his hand and stood up.

As They launched immediately into the most ridiculously over-the-top waltz Regulus had ever seen — and with him, the rest of the common room, by the looks of the both amused and confused gazes of the other Slytherin students.

Regulus, leaning against the wall next to the fireplace, was actually enjoying the show of Isa pretending to swoon while Barty attempted to dip her, nearly pulling them down in the process.

A quick glance at the clock made him realise he unfortunately had to leave.

“Don’t break any furniture,” Regulus called dryly over his shoulder as he climbed the stairs to the dorm.

“No promises!” Isa trilled — and promptly collided with a footstool.

Shortly after, Regulus was walking across the Hogwarts grounds, broom slung casually over his shoulder. The weather was glorious: the sky an unbroken stretch of blue, the sun high and hot and a breeze light enough to feel refreshing. The heat was the main reason he hadn’t bothered wearing his robes but had instead opted for a t-shirt and trousers. The other reason was that they were allowed to wear whatever they wanted now that classes were over, and Regulus didn’t feel like donning his entire Quidditch kit just for a lazy afternoon fly.

When he mounted his broom and kicked off, the world below dropped away and the welcome wind sang in his ears. He took his first lap slowly, savouring the clean scent of warm grass and summer air. Halfway through his second circuit, a flash of black hair caught his eye — and then a Quaffle sailed skyward.

“Hi, Cap!” Miller shouted, shooting up beside him with a broad grin.

She hovered next to him, balanced easily on her broom, cheeks flushed and eyes bright.

The Quidditch season had of course already ended, but the weather

had been too perfect to waste. Miller, who would be returning to her Muggle village for the summer without any chance to fly, asked him if he wanted to join him on the pitch until term ended. There was no practice, there were no drills — just sky and sunlight, and chasing each other or throwing a Quaffle back and forth. Sometimes Regulus even let the Snitch loose so they could race after it for the hell of it. Miller was always in a good mood. Flying with her was easy, and conversation with her came naturally.

They descended about an hour later, landing near the lake and sprawling beneath one of the massive trees on the far side — shielded enough by nearby bushes to avoid nosy questions about what exactly the Black heir was doing hanging out with the only Muggleborn in Slytherin.

Miller had, mercifully, brought two glass bottles of water and a couple of muffins she'd nicked from lunch.

"God," she sighed, flopping onto the grass and staring up at the sky. A wide, contented grin spread across her face. "Can't believe the year's over. How'd you do on exams, Cap?"

Regulus gave a short laugh. "Fine. What about you? Did you survive Transfiguration in the end?"

Miller beamed. "Absolutely smashed it. Your tutoring worked wonders."

Regulus gave a satisfied nod, tearing into his muffin.

After a moment, Miller rolled onto her side, propping her head on one hand. "Have you ever been to a professional match?"

Regulus glanced at her. "Yeah. Last time was a few years back, though. Went with my uncle."

"What's it like?"

He huffed a laugh. "It's massive. Thousands of people, the pitch practically glows under the charmwork — makes the school version feel like backyard broomsticks. You can feel the whole stadium shake when someone scores. It's loud, wild, *completely* mad."

Miller let out a dreamy, "Ohhh," and fell back again, staring up at the sky like she could see it play out above her.

Regulus laughed. “I’ll take you to a match sometime. Proper one.”

Miller turned her head, wide-eyed. “Really?”

Her surprise caught him slightly off guard, and he felt a flicker of something unexpectedly warm at the awe in her voice. He nodded. “Yeah. Sure.”

They let the quiet settle around them again, the branches above rustling gently in the breeze.

“It’s a shame we only get a week of this,” Miller said eventually. “I could’ve done with a month — no classes, lie-ins, flying every afternoon…”

“Well, better enjoy it while we’ve got it. Only five days left before we’re back on the train.”

Miller’s expression soured. “Oh, Merlin — I forgot. The bloody *Ball*.”

Regulus snorted. She sounded exactly like Isa. “Aren’t you girls supposed to like that sort of thing? Dresses, dancing, spiked punch…”

She turned her head slightly, smile dimming. She bit the inside of her cheek. Clearly, something was bothering her.

“What is it?”

She gave a soft, dismissive laugh. “Nothing, Cap.”

He tore a chunk off his muffin and lobbed it at her. It bounced off her shoulder.

“Spill.”

Miller groaned. “Well… you know…” She looked at him, then away again. “Violet and Denise have been going on about it all week. The dancing and everything…”

Regulus frowned, still not seeing the issue.

A pause followed.

Then, all in a rush, she blurted out: “I don’t know how to dance.”

Regulus blinked — and then barked a laugh loud enough that Sirius would’ve been proud. “Well, I’m hardly a dancer either, Miller. You

just… move your body to the rhythm, don't you? Bit of left, bit of right. Swing your arms a bit — job done."

She shot him a withering look, face colouring. "I mean proper dancing, Cap. *Ballroom. Waltz.*"

And that's when it clicked.

Of course, Miller wouldn't have learnt any of that. She had no reason to attend the sort of starchy events that required ballroom dancing, being a Muggleborn.

"You *do* know you don't have to dance, right?" Regulus said. "You can just stick to the side, have a drink, wait for the fun music to start."

Miller rolled her eyes. "Yes, obviously. But Violet and Denise have been teasing me nonstop. And I might've… sort of… implied I *could* dance."

She groaned dramatically, flopping back onto the grass. "They're going to rinse me forever."

Regulus took another bite of muffin. Then, after a pause, he looked over at her — and an idea occurred to him.

"I'll teach you."

She sat up halfway, blinking. "What?"

"I've been dragged to more stiff balls than I can count. I can dance. I'll teach you."

Miller looked utterly baffled. "How? Where?"

He glanced around. The tree cast long shadows. They were tucked away, private, secluded. No one nearby to gawk or gossip…

He shrugged, then stood up and offered her a hand.

Miller stared at it, then burst out laughing. "Here? You want to teach me *here*?"

"Why not?" he said calmly. We don't need music. It's just counting and steps."

Still laughing, a little flustered, she took his hand and got to her feet. Regulus noticed the slight nervousness in the way she stepped closer,

the twitch of her fingers.

“Alright,” he said, voice gentler now. “Left hand on my shoulder. Right hand in mine. Like this.”

She followed his instructions, and he rested his free hand lightly at her waist. He was acutely aware of the sudden closeness, so he kept his tone light, trying to ease the awkwardness.

“Comfortable?”

Miller gave a tiny nod.

“Good. We’re going to try a basic waltz. It’s a box step — I lead, you follow. One — two — three…”

They started moving slowly. Her trainers occasionally bumped against his shoes, but they kept going. He murmured the rhythm, corrected her posture with a gentle hand.

On the third circuit, she stepped directly on his foot.

“Sorry!” she yelped, face blazing red.

Regulus laughed. “You owe me a toe.”

“Oh, shut it,” Miller muttered, pink-cheeked but smiling now, eyes shining with amusement.

They kept going. He taught her the waltz, and — at her insistence — something vaguely resembling a foxtrot, though that quickly descended into confused laughter and clumsy, off-beat shuffling. He’d just begun to feel the rare comfort of it — sun-drenched, half out of breath, no one watching — when an obnoxious bark of laughter shattered the peace.

His head whipped round.

Sure enough, halfway down the slope stood Sirius, looking unbearably pleased with himself. Lupin and Pettigrew were flanking him, and just behind — of course — was James. Wind-tousled, golden-skinned, sleeves rolled up and collar loose, he looked annoyingly handsome in the sunlight.

Regulus, against himself, let his eyes trail over the open collar of his shirt a bit too long before meeting his gaze. He felt the sudden, sharp flutter in his stomach and violently pushed it down.

He turned sharply to his brother instead.

“Sirius,” he said coolly.

“Reg.” Sirius grinned. “Didn’t mean to interrupt your romantic little moment. Didn’t realise this spot was taken.”

Regulus shot him a glare. Miller, beside him, looked suddenly very interested in the grass. Her face was scarlet.

“I’m teaching her to dance,” Regulus said, voice clipped. “For the Ball.”

Sirius’s eyes lit with wicked glee. “Oh, well in that case,” he said, throwing his arms wide like a stage actor, “by all means — carry on. Don't let us get in the way of young love.”

Regulus glared harder, ignoring the way James was unable to hold back the snickers behind Sirius, one hand covering his mouth. Regulus turned to glare at him too.

“I think she’s got the hang of it, actually.”

Miller’s eyes flicked between the brothers.

Regulus turned to her. “Let’s go.”

She didn’t argue. They grabbed their brooms and bottles and set to return to the castle. They walked in silence for a while, the only sound the grass crunching under their feet.

It was Miller who broke the silence.

“You two are so alike.”

Regulus gave her a sharp look. “We’re actually very different.”

She shrugged. “I mean, you look incredibly alike — same hair, same eyes. And, well — your brother’s always been nice to me. Kind, actually. Like you.”

Regulus arched a brow but didn’t say anything.

They reached the common room and paused in the entrance. The air was cooler indoors, and both looked vaguely reluctant to part ways.

Miller smiled at him — bright and warm. “Same time tomorrow?”

Instantly, his stomach sank.

“Actually…” he hesitated. “I can’t tomorrow. But the day after, alright?”

Miller’s nodded easily. “Sure, Cap. Plans with friends?”

“No,” he sighed, the looming prospect instantly pressing on his chest. “Visiting my mother, actually.”

*****

He’d received Cissy’s letter two days ago, informing him he was expected at Bellatrix’s this evening. As always, she’d sorted it out with Slughorn.

Although Regulus had always felt some unhealthy level of anxiety while walking from the entrance hall to Bellatrix’s meeting room, this time was worse. This time, the dread sat so low and heavy in his chest he was astonished it hadn’t fallen right out of his body. His throat was dry to the point of cracking, and his palms were slick with sweat.

He had been called in for a meeting five days before the end of term. Whatever it was, it couldn’t wait a few days until he’d no longer be at Hogwarts. Whatever it was, it was something so urgent, so significant that they were willing to risk raising further suspicion by pulling him out of the castle yet another night.

Besides this knowledge eating at him, completely paralysing him, the meeting would also mark the first time he’d see the Dark Lord since the Ritual.

He felt nauseous just thinking about it — about what the Dark Lord had done to himself and to Regulus, but also about him *knowing* and realising that no matter what happened, he could *not* risk raising any suspicion. If the Dark Lord knew that Regulus knew…

No. He couldn’t afford even a flicker of hesitation.

So, the two days between receiving the letter and this meeting, Regulus had revisited every interaction he’d ever had with the Dark Lord, turning them over like puzzle pieces, taking them as an example of how to act now too. He’d concluded that he was typically quiet in meetings, reserved, always careful, but not invisible — he’d asked questions, taken an interest. He had never pushed, though, had never asked for more information than absolutely necessary.

The knowledge made him sick. The realisation that he had been so gullible, so trusting. That he had believed that the Dark Lord had truly found him special.

With every bone in his body, with every fibre of his being, he wished that it wasn't something like Hohenhain. He could not justify taking part in something like that. He had learned last time, after all, that there were hidden agendas everywhere.

He had been so, *so* stupid.

He had helped them find Legot, and Legot had been killed. He had freed the spy from Hohenhain, only for them to use her to try to murder the Potters. And now he was being summoned again. Whatever they wanted, it wouldn't be innocent. It never was.

After composing that letter, a strange sense of resignation had mastered him that still lingered. He had made a choice. It was a dangerous, terrifying choice, but he knew it was the best one in the given circumstances. With all that had happened before, all that he'd done so far, this choice was the best one, even though it was dangerous, even though he probably wouldn't make it out alive.

Now, standing before the heavy door of the meeting room, hand closed around the doorknob, he willed that strange sense of purpose to return to him.

He would probably be killed. His plan was reckless and he was prone to fail. But the plan was *his* .

For the first time in his life, he felt he actually had a choice.

Everything had been decided for him. Every part of his life had been of someone else's choice.

His clothes were tailored by Mr. Dawson at Cissy's request. His subjects at Hogwarts were dictated by Mother. His future spouse was chosen by others. His childhood taken from him by his governor.

So little in his life had been of his choice.

But this — this was a choice *he* had made. And if he'd die making it, that was alright. Because for once, he'd be true to himself.

He had to play it well, though. He had to come across as usual — completely normal. He could not let shine through that anything had

changed.

So, drawing a deep, *deep* breath, he turned the knob and stepped inside.

He was early. Bellatrix, of course, was already there — seated near the head of the table with a glass of wine in hand, her eyes sharp and feral. Like always, something in her gaze made his stomach roll. Rabastan and Rodolphus were nearby, speaking animatedly with Lucius.

And then — at the end of the table, in his usual place — sat the Dark Lord.

Regulus's stomach flipped. Their eyes met. For one horrible moment, time stalled.

"Good evening, Regulus," the Dark Lord said.

"Good evening, my Lord," Regulus replied, and to his immense relief, his voice came out steady and normal.

He took a seat beside Rabastan and occupied himself by watching the others trickle in. It was a large turnout tonight. All the usual figures were there — Yaxley, Mr. Nott, Mr. Rosier, Rowle, Travers — all exchanging pleasantries, pouring themselves drinks and talking business.

And then there were a few men Regulus didn't recognise. They were clearly thrilled to be included, talking with the rest animatedly and laughing loudly.

Regulus's throat tightened.

What had once felt like a privilege now felt like a curse.

When everyone had arrived and the doors sealed shut behind them, the Dark Lord rose.

"My friends," he said, voice soft but commanding, "we stand on the brink of transformation."

The room fell silent.

"The Ministry still attempts to pacify the population with hollow promises and half-measures," he went on. "They paint over the cracks in our world with sentiment. But beneath it all — resentment grows.

Discontent spreads. Minchum and his feeble administration have proven themselves incapable of true leadership — and the people are beginning to see it."

He paused, letting the silence settle again.

"Our task is to feed that unrest. To widen the cracks, to expose the incompetence that lies beneath their polished veneer."

Bellatrix gave a sharp, breathless laugh. "Oh, I *love* a bit of chaos. Let them clutch at rules and robes while the world burns around them."

Lucius gave her a sidelong glance, then drawled smoothly, "Chaos is a tool, not the aim. What we need is disillusionment. If the public turn on Minchum — if they begin to *doubt* — we gain ground."

Rodolphus sat at the edge of his seat. "But… resentment with the administration doesn't necessarily mean support for *us* , does it?"

Regulus understood exactly what he was implying. The cracks in Minchum's regime were showing — that much was obvious. More and more people were beginning to question the Ministry's handling of the Revolution. Yes, their response had been harsher than anything Jenkins had attempted — sweeping imprisonment laws, tighter reforms in the Wizengamot, raids without trial — but none of it was working, not properly. They were doing everything in their power to paper over the cracks, to cover up every failure, every misstep, but people were starting to notice.

Still, that didn't mean the dissenters were pledging themselves to the Dark Lord's cause. Quite the opposite — many who stood against the Ministry were, in fact, radical modernists. During that soirée in Slughorn's office, it had taken Regulus only a second to realise that Lily Evans was one of these as well, and she had been out to destroy Mr Crouch's colleague from the very first moment.

Lucius interjected smoothly. "That may be true. But chaos, in any form, works in our favour. Disillusionment breeds opportunity. If the public turn against Minchum — even slightly — recruitment becomes that much easier."

The Dark Lord gave a slow, deliberate nod. "Indeed. And beyond that — should the Ministry collapse, which we do not expect imminently, but cannot rule out entirely — it would open a path. There is unrest not only among the public but within the Ministry itself. Disloyalty is festering behind many a door. When the current administration falls,

those who remain may be more... pliable."

One of the unfamiliar men — a stout, ruddy-faced wizard Regulus didn't recognise — frowned. "Right, but... with everything that's already happened, what would *actually* work to turn the tide? Even Hohenhain didn't push things over."

The Dark Lord let out a low, cold laugh — the kind that never reached his eyes.

Regulus felt a shiver dance across his spine.

"Quite right," the Dark Lord said. "After all our efforts — the minor attacks, the operation in Provence, a prison break in Switzerland — one would expect *something* to have been enough by now. And yet…"

Silence followed, thick and waiting.

"…yet, we still have cards to play," the Dark Lord went on softly. "The Ministry prides itself on its law. Its order. Its strength. And nothing exemplifies that more than Azkaban."

Regulus knew this. The Azkaban reforms were the Ministry's crown jewel — the pet project of Mr. Crouch. Stricter sentences, more Dementors, expanded powers for the Auror Office, faster convictions in the Wizengamot… The measures had become the face of Minchum's anti-dark crusade.

They just weren't too successful, something they tried to sweep under the rug by pretending to the outside world that things weren't as bad as they were.

The Dark Lord smiled thinly. "So. We've designed a plan — one that the people will take... personally."

Bellatrix gave a manic giggle that Regulus tried really hard to ignore. Yaxley exchanged a smug look with Lucius. It made Regulus realise that at least these three had been told already — had perhaps helped shape the plan, even.

By the looks of the rest of the room — intrigued and confused — they hadn't.

The Dark Lord leaned forward slightly. "It is Azkaban we will target. But no — not in the way you're thinking."

Regulus's stomach twisted.

He truly, *truly* wished they weren't going for another prison break.

The Dark Lord gave another laugh, sharp and vicious, as though he'd plucked the thought from Regulus's mind.

"No, not another escape. I think we've had enough of those, haven't we?" he said.

The room chuckled and Bellatrix shrieked with open delight.

"But we *will* target the Ministry's pride and joy," he continued, voice dropping. "Their beloved Azkaban guards."

Regulus's throat went dry in an instant.

Dementors.

The Dark Lord's eyes gleamed. "We are going to force the public to confront the utter failure of this government. To see how little control they truly have."

Bellatrix gave a breathy moan of excitement. "Ooooh — we're going after Hogwarts."

Regulus really, *really* tried to compose himself, to school his features, but he knew he'd done a poor job at hiding his shock.

Bellatrix laughed fanatically, clearly delighted by Regulus's reaction.

Lucius spoke next, his tone characteristically businesslike. "We're not targeting the students — let's make that clear. But we are going to send a message."

The Dark Lord nodded, dark satisfaction curling his lips. "We will set the Dementors loose. And they will make their way to Hogwarts."

Regulus was completely lost for words.

Yes, the latest revelations had shown that the Dark Lord was indeed capable of horrors. And Regulus knew what they, as Revolutionaries, had so far done things that were considered… controversial at best. And he knew that the Revolution had no qualms about murder — the Potters were proof enough of that.

But this — to unleash *Dementors*, soul-sucking creatures, on a *school*…

It was completely, fucking *deranged*.

Lucius continued smoothly, as though discussing strategy for a board game. “Hogwarts is well protected. The creatures won’t breach the castle. They won’t reach the students. But that isn’t the point. The point is to show the public that the Ministry can’t even protect the one institution that gives it half its legitimacy. If they can’t stop the Dementors… what *can* they do?”

Regulus’s heart was pounding, his thoughts racing. He did not like this plan — not one bit. Hogwarts might well be protected, yes — but if something went wrong… it was an unthinkably high risk. Setting Dementors loose on *children* just to send a bloody message… It was utter madness.

For a brief moment, he wondered… Wondered whether he would have seen the strategic logic in this a few months ago. Before the Ritual, before his eyes had been forced open… Wondered whether he’d have sat there, nodding, agreeing, even justifying it to himself as a necessary evil…

The thought made him sick.

A wave of nausea hit him so hard he had to focus on breathing slowly through his nose.

Then Rabastan spoke. “There’s bound to be one or two Dementors that make it onto the grounds. Even into the castle, surely?”

Lucius responded smoothly. “Possibly, yes. But the Ministry’s bound to respond quickly — Aurors will be dispatched within minutes. The creatures won’t get far.”

And then, the idea struck him. With the stress he’d been under for weeks, the instant dread just by being in this meeting and pretending nothing had changed — while in fact *everything* had changed — and the imminent terror he felt at the idea of letting Dementors loose at Hogwarts, his mind really had no right being as sharp as it was. But somehow it *was* . And he was so, so grateful for it.

He cleared his throat, summoning every ounce of composure, of restraint, to play this well.

“If I may, my Lord… I’d like to offer a thought.”

The room stilled slightly. The Dark Lord turned to him, a flicker of

amusement — and something like pride — in his eyes.

That look would have made Regulus's entire year, once.

Now it made him want to vomit on the table.

"Of course, Regulus," the Dark Lord said, voice almost indulgent. "Speak."

Regulus forced himself to meet his gaze. "Although my absences from Hogwarts are, of course, being handled… I cannot shake the sense that certain members of staff are suspicious. No one's asked directly, but… well, they know my family. They know my heritage. They know where my allegiances — logically — ought to lie."

He paused to swallow down the bile rising in his throat.

"I was wondering if it might help to… lead them slightly astray. To give the impression that I'm *not* where I am now. That I don't belong to those orchestrating the attack."

Lucius smiled, clearly impressed.

"Very clever," the Dark Lord murmured, fingers steepled. "And what did you have in mind?"

Regulus's voice remained steady. "If things were to escalate… what if I were to fight *on the other side*?"

Bellatrix cackled, derisive and unhinged. "Oh, how *sweet* — is my dear Reggie going to protect the little Gryffindors from the nasty Dementors?"

He did not look at her. He would not give her the satisfaction.

"I was thinking about my fellow *Slytherins*, actually," he said coldly. "And of course, it's only for appearances. The idea is to give them all the *wrong* impression — that I have no knowledge of, let alone allegiance to, the group responsible. To preserve some leverage going into my final year. And… well, I believe we've established that I likely won't be needed — if the Dementors don't get far."

Lucius nodded, clearly approving. "That's actually an excellent plan, Regulus."

"Yes," said the Dark Lord softly. "Very smart indeed."

There was a murmur of agreement.

“When is this meant to happen, then?” Mr. Nott spoke from the other side of the table.

The Dark Lord answered. “It’s come to my attention that there will be a Ball to mark the end of term.”

Bellatrix scoffed, her lip curling. “Trust that lunatic Dumbledore to throw a bloody Ball when the country’s falling apart.”

The Dark Lord’s expression didn’t change. “Yes. And with such an event, the school will be at its most alert — every Auror on edge. They may even expect something.”

He smiled — a cold, cruel thing.

“So naturally, we’ll *not* strike then. Instead… we’ll strike two days *after*. When they’ve let their guard down. The last day before the students go home for the summer. No one will see it coming.”

*****

If Regulus hadn’t already felt disenchanted, he certainly did now.

They were going to release *Dementors* around a school full of *children*.

It was a rather straightforward plan. The Dementor were, contrary to what the Minchum administration wanted everyone to believe, not under governmental control. The Dark Lord would unleash them, send them to Hogwarts, but no one would, of course, know it was him — it would lead to a lot of backlash and actually weaken support for the Revolution. Even the most fervent supporters of the cause would be uneasy at the idea of sending soul-sucking creatures to a school full of children. Regulus had seen it in Mr. Nott’s eyes, too — the unspoken plea to Regulus to keep Isa safe, no matter what.

No, if the world discovered that the Revolutionaries had sent Dementors to Hogwarts, it would not serve the cause. But no one would know. No one would be able to prove anything. The only thing the public would know for certain was that the Ministry had lost control of the creatures. The inevitable chaos, the conspiracy theories and outrage, would be more than enough to sow dissent and stir up anti-Minchum sentiment.

Despite the reasons, Regulus couldn’t make sense of it.

After everything he'd learned through the Ritual, he *should've* expected something like this from the Dark Lord. But to see Lucius defend something like this… Regulus had always liked Lucius. He was kind, charming and — unlike the likes of Yaxley and Rodolphus — sensible. Or well — so Regulus had believed. He felt a strange pang in his stomach at the thought of his cousin's husband standing by a plan like this.

Was this what war did to people? Slowly push them past the boundary of humanity — until all that was left was a shadow of the worst they could be?

He had considered leaking something, had gone over ways to warn the right people — but he couldn't do it. He couldn't risk anyone questioning his loyalty. No — with the plans he had for the future, his faithfulness to the Dark Lord had to be utterly indubitable. The plan had to unfold exactly as laid out in the meeting, and Regulus had to play his part — nothing less, nothing more.

He spent most of the following day doing everything he could *not* to think about the meeting, throwing himself into distraction. They were leaving Hogwarts in three days. Tonight was the Ball. The day after tomorrow, Dementors would be set loose on the grounds.

He could not fathom it. Could not make sense of his life anymore. It had become nothing more than an unbearable tangle of dread and duty. Sure, there had been reprieves, but they'd grown scarce and short.

With his plans for the future, it would take a miracle to make it out alive, but it would take something absolutely divine to make it out sane.

Still, he was glad his mind had been sharp enough to devise his role during the Dementor attack. He couldn't, in any world or reality, face James if he hadn't done *something* to protect the school. In a strange twist of fate, he would be doing exactly what he wanted to do — with the Dark Lord's blessing. A small win. But a win nonetheless.

He tried hard not to think about the last day at Hogwarts, but it was hard. And the thoughts that filled the space instead weren't much better.

So far, he had been able to bury it under more pressing concerns. The revelations of the Ritual. His plans in response to it. The exams, Captaincy… But there really was no escaping, no avoiding the

knowledge that in only a few weeks, he'd be engaged to Isa. And with that came the increasingly pressing problem of James. He had to tell him. He couldn't let James find out from the Prophet.

Sure, they were over, and sure, there'd never been a future for James and him, but it felt wrong for James to find out about the impending marriage of Regulus and *Isa* through a half-page newspaper announcement.

That, of course, reminded him of another problem — that there were only a few days left, and after that… he'd likely never see James again. Or rather — in a strange turn of event — he *hoped* he wouldn't. Because any meeting after Hogwarts would be from opposite sides of the war.

And yet, instead of using the little time he had left to speak to James — to say anything that mattered — he spent the day on dull, mundane tasks. He packed, helped Isa choose a dress for the Ball, returned his books to the library.

He still had an hour or so before he was due to meet Miller at the pitch, so he just aimlessly wandered through the castle…until his steps brought him, unconsciously, to the door of the Charms classroom.

There was really no reason to be there. There was no homework, no assignments… But something about the room — one he'd used so much this past year — tugged at him. Maybe he just needed to say goodbye.

He pushed open the door.

To his surprise, someone had beaten him to it.

Lupin.

The two boys froze, staring at each other across the quiet room.

"Hi," said Lupin.

Regulus cleared his throat. "Hi."

Another silence stretched while Lupin sat in a chair with a book in hand and Regulus hoovered awkwardly in the doorway.

"Aren't you done with your N.E.W.T.s?" Regulus asked, nodding toward the book.

Lupin raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t *you* done with exams?”

Fair point. Regulus couldn’t really argue with that.

“I came to say… goodbye.”

Lupin looked faintly amused. “To *me*?”

“No,” Regulus shot back quickly.

“…To the room?”

Regulus didn’t answer, but the silence spoke for him. Lupin seemed to pick up on it and gave a soft huff of laughter, trying — and failing — to hide a smirk.

“Well,” he said, gesturing loosely around the room. “By all means. Do your thing.”

Regulus rolled his eyes but stepped inside. He dropped into his usual chair, unsure what exactly he was meant to do now. His bag was nearly empty — he’d already returned most of his books to the library — except for a few that were actually his. He reached in to grab the one he was currently reading — *The Master and Margarita* — but paused when his eyes fell on a familiar pocket-sized volume.

His mind returned to that conversation with Lupin about the book that Lupin, strangely so, apparently hadn’t read, and how Regulus had spilled the plot to him.

“Sorry… I guess I’ve ruined it now if you ever wanted to read it.”

“Not at all. The joy of a book isn’t just in the plot. It’s in the way it’s told — the phrasing, the rhythm…”

He pulled the little book from his bag and awkwardly moved it between both his hands, before he — without really thinking, in the spur of the moment — crossed the room and placed the book down on Lupin’s desk.

Lupin looked up at him, eyebrows raised in silent question.

“Have you read it yet?” Regulus asked.

Lupin shook his head. “Not yet.”

“Then take it.”

“What?”

“Take the book. It’s enlightening.”

Lupin blinked. “You know I won’t be able to return it, right? I’ll be gone in a few days.”

Regulus gave a small nod. “I know. That’s fine. I can recite most of it anyway.”

Lupin tilted his head again, studying him. After a brief pause, he said quietly, “Thank you.”

Regulus nodded and returned to his seat, pulling out *The Master and Margarita* and opening it across his lap.

*****

As had apparently become tradition, Regulus found himself crammed in with the rest of his friends in the dorm before the Ball. Melania and Amaryllis were perched at the foot of Evan’s bed, while Barty and Evan lounged on Barty’s. Mulciber had claimed a spot on the floor, legs stretched out; Avery was sprawled by the window, and Severus sat cross-legged by the wall. Isa was on Regulus’s bed with him, lazily reclining against the headboard.

“All right, Crouch, please tell me you got your hands on some liquor,” Isa sighed desperately.

Barty smirked smugly and, with great ceremony, pulled two bottles of Firewhisky from beneath his bed.

“Please tell me you got the fags, Nott.”

Without missing a beat, Isa produced a pack of cigarettes from her beaded bag and held them up like treasure.

It took a moment for Regulus’s brain to catch up, but then he bristled. “You’re not smoking those filthy things in the do—”

But it was already too late. Isa and Barty had each lit a cigarette, pointedly ignoring him. The packet was tossed to Mulciber, who took one, then lobbed it across to Amaryllis. One by one, the pack made its rounds. In the end, only Regulus, Melania, and Severus remained without, trapped in a growing fog of second-hand smoke.

Oh, if all their parents could see them now — their perfect pureblood

children smoking those filthy Muggle sticks in the boys' dorm.

Although Regulus truly hated them, he couldn't help but feel a flicker of pride at their rebellion. Apparently, he was feeling rebellious today.

But it wasn't just rebellion he felt — it was a worrisome mix of so many feelings he felt like a walking Bombarda. He was stressed and resigned, grateful and melancholy, sad and furious, all at once, all coexisting and conflicting at the same time.

Three nights, and he wouldn't see his brother again. Three nights, and he wouldn't see James again. Tonight would probably be the last time he'd see either of them outside mealtimes. The thought made him utterly miserable. The fact that *that* was what made him miserable — and not the looming Dementor attack — made him feel faintly sick with himself. But then, inevitably, his thoughts would circle back to his brother and James, and the Dementors would be forgotten altogether.

He'd known for some time now that they were all going to part ways. That they'd chosen different paths. That life would take them in different directions. And although so much had changed in Regulus's life over the last few weeks, *that* fact hadn't. He'd always known it — but now he *felt* it like never before.

He was yanked out of his spiral by a sudden cheer from Isa — half-mocking, half-encouraging — as Barty took an exaggerated gulp straight from the Firewhisky bottle. He coughed dramatically, grinned, then passed it to Evan, who took a sip and handed it off to Isa. She was just about to hand it over to Mulciber — skipping right past Regulus — when he snatched it mid-pass, startling her.

Regulus took a long, burning gulp. The room erupted in cheers.

Not Isa, though — she just smiled at him, something softer in her expression. Regulus recognised the look in her eyes. She understood. She'd been in the same place a year ago, saying goodbye to Davies.

Tonight, it was Regulus's turn to say goodbye to James.

"Oh, tonight's going to be bloody brilliant, " Barty crowed, raising the second bottle. "I like Black drinking."

Evan snorted. "You remember L-O-V-E?"

Regulus shot him a murderous glare. As if anyone could forget that

particular humiliation. It was a bloody miracle it hadn't ended up in the newest edition of *Hogwarts: A History* yet.

Barty sighed dramatically, all misty-eyed. "Yeah, but I also like aggressive drunk Black. Punching the living hell out of Crabbe was *so* satisfying."

That got a round of laughter.

Regulus rolled his eyes, trying not to smile. "Crabbe's a bloody git."

Then, Barty seemed to suddenly remember that Regulus had, in fact, punched the living daylights out of Crabbe for a reason.

He tilted his head, then squinted at Regulus. "That reminds me — what is going on with you and Miller, Black?"

Regulus raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

Barty gave a pointed look. "Well, it's come to my attention you're spending hours with her every afternoon."

Regulus shot him a fierce glare. "We're *flying* together, Barty. What are you trying to say?"

He could feel everyone watching him now — that sharp shift in the air. The silence told him this wasn't the first time the topic had come up.

Barty shrugged. "Dunno. One might *almost* think there's… something there."

Regulus blinked, caught entirely off guard. "Barty. You *do* realise Miller is like… thirteen, right? That's practically paedophilia."

The room erupted in laughter.

Barty shrugged, completely unbothered. "Can't deny she's fit, Black."

Regulus stared at him. "...What?"

"Oh, *come on*, someone back me up here."

Amaryllis didn't even look up from where she was flicking ash into an empty teacup. "She *is* considered very pretty. Silky black hair, those sharp green eyes… Classic look, really."

Regulus waved Isa's smoke away from his face, sharp and irritated. "Again — thirteen. We're just friends."

Barty opened his mouth, clearly gearing up for another remark, but he was cut short by Evan who seemed to sense the sensitivity of the topic.

"So, what's everyone up to for the holidays?"

The group fell into a scattered, half-serious conversation about plans — trips abroad, family obligations and so on. Regulus stayed silent and instead let the chatter wash over him, not sure what to contribute to the conversation.

Because it was going to be a *strange* summer. First of all, all of his friends — Barty, Evan, Mulciber, Severus and Avery — would be receiving the Mark come early July. And Regulus knew far too well what that Inauguration entailed. He'd tried, rather unsuccessfully, not to think too much about what that meant, not to picture his friends becoming murderers. Tried especially not to picture Barty — so eager to prove himself — with a wand levelled at someone's chest.

The other factor highly contributing to the absurdity of the summer would, of course, be his engagement to Isa. None of his friends knew about it yet. Regulus had already discussed a few details with Cissy, but he'd be spending most of the beginning of the holidays finalising preparations for the moment he got down on one knee.

He felt Isa's gaze on him. He was sure she was thinking about the same thing.

They quickly looked away from each other.

Regulus snatched the bottle of Firewhisky from Avery and knocked back another burning gulp of the foul drink.

Here and now. That was all he could afford to think about.

If he let his mind drift to anything beyond this night — the Dementors, Inaugurations, the murders, the engagement, his plans…. Well, he'd need a hell of a lot more than two bottles of Firewhiskey just to keep himself steady.

*****

When they finally arrived at the Great Hall, it was already buzzing.

The place had been transformed. Swathes of fabric hung from the ceiling in House colours, enchanted flowers bloomed along every table and windowsill, and a section of the floor had been cleared and charmed into a polished dance floor, shimmering faintly beneath floating candles. Along one wall, a row of drinks tables had been set up — nothing alcoholic, of course, but Regulus was clever enough to know that a castle with James, Sirius, Barty and Evan wouldn't serve unspiked drinks for long.

They were so late that the moment they entered, Dumbledore stepped up to begin the official welcome with a large speech that Regulus didn't bother listening to.

Instead, his eyes scanned the crowd, subtly clocking where most of the Gryffindors had gathered. He needed to avoid that side of the room. No accidental glances, no chance encounters.

He turned his head slightly — and then froze. A mop of familiar, chaotic dark hair, unmistakable even across a crowded hall.

Regulus jerked his head away immediately, heart lurching, gaze snapping to the dance floor.

A few professors were gamely opening the first dance, joined by a handful of students. It took another couple of stately pieces before things loosened up a bit — the floor steadily filling as students paired off, eager to show off their skills at ballroom dancing.

At some point, he spotted Violet and Denise — Miller's friends — dancing with two third-year boys, laughing and swirling. Miller lingered awkwardly on the edge of the dancefloor, watching her friends with a mix of amusement and uncertainty.

Regulus caught her eye.

She blinked in surprise when he gestured for her to come over, and he could see her hesitate. He tilted his head towards the floor again. She bit her lip, trying not to laugh, as Regulus walked up to her.

She was wearing a beautiful green dress and her hair was loose for a change. Regulus violently and irritably pushed down Barty's words. *Can't deny she's pretty, Black.*

He offered her his hand. "Come on. Let's show them what a magnificent dancer you've become, alright?"

Miller laughed, already reaching for his hand. “I’ll try not to stub your toes, Cap.”

Regulus smirked. “I’m wearing steel shoes tonight just for this occasion.”

That made her burst into laughter, and with that, they stepped onto the floor, blending into the crowd as the next piece of music began.

*****

Despite everything in his body screaming at him to go to James — to say something, anything, before he left Hogwarts for good — Regulus somehow managed to steer clear of what had evidently been unofficially declared the Gryffindor corner of the Great Hall.

After performing his dutiful dances to rile up Miller’s friends, he’d had a few drinks, some half-hearted conversations with teammates, and a couple of turns on the floor with Isa and Barty — none of it filling the aching void in his chest, but just enough to keep his impulses in check.

Still, in a particularly weak moment, he’d glanced the wrong way — and the sight of James had knocked the air clean out of his lungs.

James was dancing — or trying to — with the Macmillan sisters, utterly unbothered by the crowd around him. His dress robes were half-unbuttoned and crooked, his shirt coming untucked, hair sticking out in all directions like he’d just come from a Quidditch match. He was laughing, cheeks pink from exertion.

He was, quite simply, beautiful.

It made Regulus’s chest ache.

Of course, not a single one of his so-called friends was around at that exact moment, so he turned sharply and stalked off to the drinks table to indulge in another distraction in the form of alcohol.

It was there he bumped into Lupin.

They both took a sip of their drinks, exchanging stiff nods.

“Lupin.”

“Black.”

“Having fun?” Lupin asked, a touch of dry amusement in his voice, lifting his Butterbeer.

“Immensely,” Regulus replied flatly.

That would have been the logical moment for Regulus to return to the relative safety of the Slytherin enclave, but instead, he found himself lingering.

He had a strange urge to make conversation — a feeling so foreign to him that it left him hovering awkwardly, so wrapped up in debating what to say that he ended up saying nothing at all.

Lupin didn’t seem to mind. He simply stood there, sipping his drink, eyes scanning the room. Against his better judgement, Regulus followed Lupin’s gaze.

The Hufflepuffs were getting on well with the Gryffindors — he recognised a few Hufflepuff players chatting animatedly with sixth-year Gryffindors they shared classes with. A little further down, a group of seventh-years were dancing in a way that was definitely more playful than elegant. Evans was among them, in a deep blue dress that made her red hair shine like firelight. Regulus didn’t doubt for a second that Severus had probably had several strokes upon seeing her.

And then, because apparently he was a masochist, he let his eyes follow Lupin’s line of sight a bit further.

There they were.

James and Sirius, laughing loudly, arms slung around each other’s shoulders, dancing like idiots in the middle of the crowd. James was twirling Sirius like they were in some melodramatic ballroom drama, making them double over in laughter.

A familiar pang settled deep in Regulus’s chest. His throat felt dry.

He forced himself to look away and glanced sideways at Lupin, expecting some kind of sad or knowing look — some flash of pity in the older boy’s eyes.

But Lupin wasn’t looking at him.

He was still watching the pair. His expression was… odd. It looked familiar, but Regulus *just* couldn’t place it… There was something

painful in it, but also a flicker of something that looked almost like… longing.

Regulus frowned, then glanced back at James and Sirius.

Then back at Lupin.

Wait.

Wait.

Oh.

“No way,” Regulus breathed.

Lupin flinched, startled, eyes jerking to Regulus with a guilty sort of confusion.

Regulus huffed a laugh. Maybe if he hadn’t had so much Firewhiskey, he would’ve kept his mouth shut. But as it stood, he had no filter left.

“You’re in love with my brother.”

Lupin sputtered into his Butterbeer, coughing violently, cheeks flushing deep red. “W—what?”

Regulus tilted his head, gaze flicking back to Sirius and James, then back to Lupin.

“You’re in love with Sirius.”

There was a beat of silence. Lupin simply stared at him, stunned.

And then, finally, Lupin broke. “…Is it that obvious?”

Regulus snorted. “I don’t know, but you were ogling him just now, so…”

Lupin groaned and rubbed his cheeks with both hands. Regulus watched with a mix of discomfort and bemused curiosity.

“…Is it… reciprocated?” Regulus asked eventually.

Lupin let out a short, bitter laugh. “I don’t know.”

They stood in silence for a moment, the sounds of the Great Hall — the laughing students, booming music, clinking glasses — washing

over them.

Lupin shrugged, still looking out into the crowd. “Statistically speaking, it’s unlikely, of course.”

Regulus raised an eyebrow.

Lupin looked at him sideways. “Both Black brothers swinging the other way?”

Despite himself, Regulus laughed. “Technically, I swing both ways.”

That earned him a proper smirk from Lupin, quiet and wry.

Regulus leaned back against the bar, watching Sirius from across the Hall. He tried to picture the two of them — Lupin and Sirius — together. He had no real reason to think Sirius was into blokes. But, truthfully, he had no reason to think he wasn’t. He didn’t know him well enough anymore.

And then the absurdity of it all hit him and he burst out laughing.

Just the idea of the Black spare having fallen in love with James Potter, eldest son of the world’s most notorious blood traitors, and the Black heir being in love with Lupin — a Halfblood *werewolf*.

Oh, Mother would positively *die*.

*****

By the second half of the evening, the ache in Regulus’s chest and the lump in his throat had become unbearable. The Firewhiskey was wearing off, and it had become almost impossible to pretend he was enjoying himself. His friends, though, obviously were. Isa was dancing the night away with Amaryllis and Melania, Mulciber and Avery had disappeared with some seventh-year girls, Barty and Evan were committing crimes against rhythm to the beat of some band, and Miller was spinning around with a third-year boy who looked both terrified and delighted. All of them were laughing and bantering, celebrating the end of yet another year at Hogwarts and looking forward to the holidays.

Regulus couldn’t take it anymore.

He secretly slipped out of the Great Hall, the noise of the Great Hall muffling as the door shut behind him. He turned to head back down to

the Dungeons, but when he walked past the door of that familiar antechamber, he stopped.

The room where, almost exactly two years ago, he had kissed James for the second time.

Their first kiss had been in the Charms classroom, of course, and had been completely unexpected and shocking. That kiss against the wall in the antechamber at the end of the year, with James's words trembling against his lips, *you're killing me* — oh, just remembering those words transported him right back to that moment.

So much had happened. Things had seemed complicated then. Sirius had left, Regulus had fallen in love with his best friend… And yet, things had become so much more complicated since. Beauxbatons had sealed their love. But he was also a Revolutionary now. He had killed, had seen people die. He was the Black heir now. He was marrying Isa.

Lost in the spiralling tide of his thoughts, Regulus didn't remember entering the room. He simply wandered through it, his fingertips brushing the cold stone walls as his mind spun. He had no sense of time — only of being pulled deeper and deeper into memory — until a presence snapped him back into the present.

He turned sharply.

James stood just inside the doorway, frozen.

His hair was a glorious mess and his eyes brimming with emotion. The characteristic smirk was gone, replaced by something softer — something wistful and unbearably tender.

Regulus forgot how to breathe.

He had been plagued by so many emotions for weeks, his thoughts soaring and winding through him. And now, for the first time in so long, all of those thoughts, all of those feelings — all of it faded away, until nothing remained but this sense of quiet calm and the devastatingly deep love he felt for the wonderful human being standing in front of him.

"James," he whispered.

"Reg."

They could have launched into sad goodbyes, teary love confessions and emotion closures. They could have talked about all that they had been, and all that they still wanted to be but never could. They could have cried, raged, pleaded.

But they didn't. Instead, they spend the night as if they'd done it a thousand times and would do it a thousand more. There was nothing but the here and now, everything beyond that pushed away for it to catch up with them later. But not now.

Now, Regulus forgot about everyone and everything but James, and took a step forward. James mirrored him.

The noise of the world — of music and laughter and footsteps — melted away, until there was nothing but this room and the pounding of their hearts. James reached out, fingers brushing Regulus's jaw with such care it made something behind his ribs tremble. Regulus tilted his head up, his own hands finding James's face, thumbs grazing over the stubble along his cheeks.

He leaned in, closing that last, torturous inch.

Their lips met — slowly, achingly, like the world had stopped turning just to witness it.

It had been months since he'd felt this. The surprising fullness of James's lips, warm and slightly chapped, parting with the softest sigh. His tongue, brushing against Regulus's, coaxing rather than claiming. That low sound escaping him, raw and involuntarily, shooting right through Regulus's soul. Those thumbs stroking his cheekbones, slightly trembling. James's hair as Regulus threaded through it, tugging gently while deepening the kiss.

Yes, that kiss was exactly what the rest of the evening would turn out to be — deep, slow and wrecking beautiful.

When they finally pulled apart, it was only far enough to breathe.

Their foreheads rested together, their hands still cradling each other's faces. James's lips were swollen, glistening. James's eyes were dark and brimming with so much love and appreciation, like Regulus was something special, something to be cherished, that it made his heart swell.

James exhaled, voice barely audible, "Oh, how I've missed that."

Regulus smiled against his lips, fragile and soft, and kissed him again.

This time, it was more urgent. Their mouths met with more hunger, more ache. Regulus's fingers curled tighter in James's hair, tugging as James's hand slipped beneath the fabric of his robes, splaying over his lower back and pulling him closer.

Regulus felt as though he might burst with it all — the ache of James being here, and yet somehow already slipping away. The fierce gratitude for the boy in his arms and everything he'd been. The hunger — the want to have him beneath him, behind him, beside him — so long as he was bare, and let Regulus show him, in every way possible, just how much he loved him. How he would love him until his dying breath.

Oh, to love and be loved like this.

Time stopped to exist. It could have been minutes or hours that they stood there, against the wall of that antechamber, bodies pressed against each other and the love pouring out of them, wrapping around them, cloaking them in nothing but cherishing and devotion.

They kissed feverishly, hands roaming, breath coming in gasps between kisses. James let out a shuddering sigh as Regulus's mouth moved to his jaw, then down the line of his neck, open-mouthed kisses trailing heat along his skin. James dropped his head back with a soft groan — then laughed, breathless, in awe, as if he couldn't believe he was finally having what he'd wanted for so long.

Regulus laughed too, pressing his forehead to James's shoulder. They paused there, both of them flushed and smiling, and then pulled back slightly, the awareness settling in that they were lucky no one had walked in on them yet.

James eyed the door briefly.

He cupped Regulus's face again, brushing his thumb just beneath his eye, and said softly, "Shall we go?"

Regulus nodded. "Yes."

They both knew what that meant.

*****

There was quite a bit of security around the castle — professors or

Aurors patrolling every corridor — so they'd agreed that Regulus would wear the cloak on the way up to the seventh floor. James, being Head Boy, could move more inconspicuously on his own, afterall. Still, at some point along the way, they were forced to duck under it together so no one would notice where exactly James was heading.

In theory, it was inconvenient. They were both too tall to walk upright, so they had to crouch awkwardly, shuffling along in near silence, steps mismatched and elbows knocking.

In practice, though, it was something else completely.

They kept bumping into each other, bodies pressed close, breaths shallow, and they had to bite their lips to keep from laughing. James's hand found Regulus's waist at one point to steady him, and Regulus's heart leapt with joy at the touch. No, in practice, they were excited to be so close, the anticipation rising as they neared their final destination. In practice, they were finally what they ought to be — two teenagers, giggly and in love.

James had summoned their familiar room, and when they stepped inside and pulled off the cloak, a strange, sudden quiet fell. Like a bated breath, a silence before the storm, a lull before an explosion of love and desire.

James smiled at him – a small, shy sort of smile that instantly warmed Regulus up on the inside.

To the rest of the world, James Potter was laughter and confidence, boldness and brilliance, always easy and effortlessly adored. But this version — this quietly blushing, bashful James, standing there like Regulus was something precious — was the most beautiful thing which only Regulus got to see.

James took a step forward. And then another.

He reached out, slowly, carefully, and began to undress him. Not hungrily, not impatiently — just gently. He unfastened the clasp at Regulus's throat, then the long buttons down the front of his dress robes, one by one. While the fabric slid away from his body, James's eyes followed his hands, watching like he was memorising every part of the boy in front of him. Regulus's hands were steadier than he expected when he returned the favour. He slid his fingers beneath James's collar, pushing the fine material off his shoulders, then tugged at the layers beneath. The way James let him, the way he seemed to

surrender himself to Regulus completely, made his hands and heart ache alike.

They didn’t speak — not a word.

Instead they walked in silence to the shower room, where the steam was already curling along the tiles. Under the soft, hissing stream of water, their hands found each other’s faces again. Regulus cupped James’s jaw, James's fingers traced Regulus’s cheek, his temple, his mouth. And then they were kissing again.

This time it was deep — impossibly deep — and slow in a way that made Regulus's skin burn. Their mouths moved like they had nowhere else to be, no one else to think about. Regulus tasted water and heat and James and his mind was spinning with want.

Again, they didn’t speak — the only sounds were the water splashing against the tiles, the low moans in James’s throat, and the quiet, wet sounds of their mouths meeting. Under the pretense of washing each other with soap, they touched every part of each other’s bodies, though not quite where they most wanted to touch or be touched — only brushing accidentally, or when kissing, their harnesses pressed against each other.

Regulus gasped at the sensation — low and sharp, the sound catching in the back of his throat.

James answered with a quiet moan, his head tipping forward against Regulus’s.

It was all too much and not enough at once.

So Regulus reached behind him and turned the tap off with a shaky breath. The stream stopped, the silence now loud with their panting.

They stepped out and dried off in silence unhurried, not looking away from each other once.

And then, without even thinking, Regulus pulled James with him — still damp and flushed — and they collapsed onto the familiar bed.

It was, strangely, the most beautiful night of his life. The night they allowed themselves to be who they truly wanted to be for each other. Nothing more than two boys irrevocably, helplessly in love with each other, two boys who felt so at home in one another that they could express it in all the ways they knew how.

It was in the way they kissed — deep, slow, unhurried — like they had all the time in the world. In the way they touched, not to possess, but to feel, to memorise. In the way Regulus savoured every sound James made — the quiet gasp when he bit his earlobe, the sharp grunt when he wrapped his hand around him, the low, shuddering moan when he took him into his mouth and held him there until James was trembling.

It was in James, too. In the way he kissed Regulus's hipbone like it was holy. In the way he moved down his body with devotion, tasting, licking, easing him open with patience and care, whispering soft encouragements against his skin. Preparing him like it was the most important thing in the world — like *he* was the most important thing in the world.

It was in the way James entered him was as gentle as his voice, steady and slow, giving him time, kissing along his back the entire way in. Regulus knelt against the headboard, feeling James enclosing him from behind.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice soft and husky in Regulus's ear.

Regulus nodded, breathless. "Yes."

There was a pause — and then James whispered, "You're so beautiful," and the words, along with the warmth of his breath against Regulus's skin, made goosebumps race down his spine.

But as much as they tried to ignore it, bury it, run from it, they couldn't escape it. Regulus felt it in the way James clung to him afterwards, soft kisses scattered across his neck like confessions. He felt it in the way James lay on his chest, eyes fluttering shut, hair damp against Regulus's collarbone, his breath slow and even. He felt it in his own hands when carding through James's hair gently while they dozed off. He felt it later again, when James's mouth found his neck in the dark, when it was all hands and heat and whispered pleas again.

It was in that question from James — to do it the other way around now.

Because it had been like that, their first time, at Black Manor. Regulus still remembered every detail of it. The awe in James's eyes, how tender he had been afterwards.

Now, it was coming full circle — a beginning and an ending, both.

Regulus didn't speak, only nodded.

James started to turn, but Regulus caught his wrist, shaking his head gently. Instead, he guided James gently onto his back.

"I want to see you," he whispered.

And James — oh, sweet, ridiculous James — melted under those words. His lips curved into the softest smile, cheeks flushing as he looked up at Regulus like he was something miraculous.

Regulus kissed him, once, twice, and then again, slower.

When he finally pushed inside, it was so, *so* slow. They were both slick with sweat, breath shallow, hair plastered to foreheads and necks. James's thighs trembled around him, his hands gripping at Regulus's hips.

Regulus paused once he was fully in, brushing a damp lock of hair from James's eyes. "How does it feel?"

James's face broke into the most devastating smile — full of awe, full of love.

"So good," he whispered. Then, after a beat, his voice broke just a little. "I feel so full of you."

Normally, Regulus would have chastised him for the cheesiness of the line. But James's eyes were so open, so honest, so *loving* and his smile was so sincere, that Regulus just let the flutter in his stomach rise and rise, until a soft smile cracked his face too.

"I love you."

James didn't even blink. "I love you too."

And that — that was when they both saw it for what it was.

Their final goodbye.

Chapter End Notes

JEGULUS

You're welcome.

x

Also, people asked about the ring. The ring/the letter etc. will all be explained in due time!

Chapter 27: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

> Alright people, here we go! As promised, the epilogue, the last chapter of this fic!
>
> Enjoy x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next day, Regulus used the same tactic as he had the last time he'd stayed over in the room — though this time, for once, he'd resigned himself to it in advance. This meant that instead of freaking out or fretting about what his friends might think, he made better use of his final minutes with James. After all, the lie about getting up early and heading to the library had worked before.

His departure from the room had thus been an easy affair, only slightly dulled by running into Sirius on the staircase between the sixth and fifth floors. Luckily, Sirius looked far too hungover to fully register the awkwardness that passed between them. Regulus gave a curt nod and kept walking.

Regulus and James had agreed not to seek each other out again — to avoid the pain of another goodbye, to make this one the last. And although nothing in Regulus felt happy or settled about it, he'd found a strange sort of acceptance. They'd known it was coming, and now it had.

Now, the only way was forward.

Besides, the looming events didn't leave much room for him to dwell on the previous night — or the fact that he and James had now officially parted ways.

Over lunch, it was easy to spot who'd had a bit too much of the spiked punch. Half the students in the Great Hall were chattering excitedly about the upcoming weather or summer holidays, and the other half looked like they'd been dragged from the grave as they miserably forced some toast down.

Regulus, for his part, did have to force himself to eat — but it had nothing to do with firewhiskey and everything to do with the knowledge that, by this time tomorrow, the Dementor attack would

take place. With every passing minute, the anxiety in his chest grew, until his brain was drowning in what-ifs and what-thens and he could barely stomach a bite of sausage.

He was, unfortunately, in the company of people who had clearly overindulged — Barty, Evan and Isa all looked pale, rough and tired, and therefore provided no distraction whatsoever.

Luckily, Miller strolled over.

“Hi Cap!” she chirped, far too brightly, making several people at the table wince.

“Hi Miller,” Regulus said with a small smile.

“Still on for flying?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Alright!” she beamed, practically bouncing. “Three today, and two tomorrow?”

Regulus’s heart sank. There would obviously be no flying tomorrow. The idea of Miller — a third-year with no idea how to defend herself — being out on the pitch while a Dementor made it onto the grounds made his stomach twist.

Even the last shred of his appetite disappeared.

“Today, yes,” he said, trying to sound casual. Then it occurred to him that if he didn’t show up tomorrow, she might still go alone. “As for tomorrow,” he continued, carefully adopting a tone of vague indifference, “I heard the weather’s going to be awful — you know how thunderstorms pop up out of nowhere. Do me a favour and… stay inside, alright?”

Miller snorted at his brotherly concern but nodded. “Sure, Cap. Let’s make the most of it today then!”

Regulus nodded again, and with that, Miller bounced off to her friends further down the table.

“I heard the weather’s terrific tomorrow, actually,” Isa said, brow arched.

Regulus forced a huff. “Really?”

“Mm-hm. Sunshine all day. Not a cloud in sight,” she said, eyes narrowing ever so slightly.

“Oh,” Regulus shrugged, feigning nonchalance. “Must’ve heard wrong, then.”

*****

He still had a few hours to kill between lunch and his flying session with Miller — hours he truly, *truly* didn’t want to spend alone, as it would only spiral his thoughts either back to the night before with James or ahead to the day to come. So when Evan and Barty suggested heading out to the lake, he was quietly relieved.

Isa had gone back to the dorm to finish packing and return a few books to the library, so it was just the three of them — Regulus, Barty and Evan — lazily chucking stones into the water and watching as other students lounged about in the sun or pushed their mates into the lake with loud, delighted shrieks.

“So,” Barty said, idly tossing a flat stone. “You heading back to Black Manor for the hols?”

Regulus nodded. “How about you?”

Barty, after all, didn’t really have a home to go back to. Last Regulus had heard, Barty’s mum was staying with her sister in Germany. And Regulus knew perfectly well that Barty would rather set himself on fire than spend the summer under the same roof as his father.

“You know you can always… stay at Black Manor, if you need to, right?”

Barty gave him a quick, appreciative smile. “Thanks, mate. I’m sure I’ll pop by. I’ll be with Rosier most of the time — apparently we’re off to Italy.”

Evan rolled his eyes. “Yes, mum insists we spend the first three weeks in Tuscany — as bloody always.”

There was a pause.

“Though,” he added with a glance at Barty, “I suppose it’ll be more tolerable with you tagging along.”

Barty grinned. “*La pizza esta delicioso,* yeah?”

Regulus snorted. “That’d be *la pizza è deliziosa,* Crouch.”

Barty rolled his eyes. “Swot.”

Evan smirked, then said, “You could come too, you know. If you wanted. Spend some time with us in Italy.”

Barty’s face lit up. “Yes, why not? The three of us — downing wine, eating pizza for breakfast…”

Regulus winced.

He hadn’t told anyone yet. His mind had been plagued for days with the knowledge that he’d at least have to tell James — but last night *really* hadn’t been the right moment, and now… now he had no idea how to tell him at all.

But it wasn’t just James who he’d need to tell. He couldn’t find Barty and Evan finding out about it through the Prophet, either.

The three of them were still watching the lake, where a third-year Gryffindor had just been pushed in with a shriek. Laughter erupted from the banks around them.

“I’m marrying Isa,” Regulus blurted out.

Evan and Barty snapped their heads round to stare at him, while Regulus kept his eyes trained on the rippling water.

“What?” Evan said flatly.

“I’m marrying Isa,” he repeated.

Barty burst out laughing.

Regulus finally looked at them, his expression serious. “I’m not joking. I’m taking her to Morocco over the summer and I’m going to propose there.”

A very tense silence followed. Both of them just stared at him, stunned.

It was Barty who, rather suddenly and fiercely, broke the silence.

“What the hell, Black? A few months ago you didn’t even know if you liked her, and now you’re asking her to *marry* you? Aren’t you skipping a few fucking steps?”

Regulus didn't look at him. Instead, he watched Evan — where, slowly, a sort of realisation was dawning across his face.

Barty kept going, arms flailing slightly now. "I mean — okay, even *if* you're completely besotted, that's no reason to—"

"Barty," Evan cut in, sharp and quiet. "Shut up."

Barty blinked, taken aback by the uncharacteristic edge in Evan's voice.

He glanced between the two of them, confused, like he was suddenly missing something important. Which, in all honesty, he obviously was.

Evan was looking at Regulus with a serious, knowing expression — wry, but not unkind.

"I don't think it's… *his* idea, Barty."

There was a long pause as the meaning sank in.

"Oh," Barty said, his suddenly soft voice laced with surprise. "Oh. I'm sorry, mate."

Regulus gave a one-shouldered shrug and lobbed a stone into the lake. The ripple spread out and disappeared.

No one really knew what to say after that.

Then Barty glanced at his watch and suddenly jumped to his feet. "Oh, *fuck*. Last Prefect meeting. Fucking Head Boy Potter is going to skin me." He paused, then gave them both a nod. "See you in a bit, yeah?"

Evan and Regulus nodded, watching as Barty sprinted back towards the castle.

Silence fell again.

Regulus didn't want to talk about the engagement or the world that Evan, unlike Barty, understood so well.

So instead, he said, "Three weeks in Italy with Crouch. You sure you're going to survive that?"

Evan snorted. "The wine helps," he joked. But then something about him shifted — he suddenly looked very interested in the grass, which he started to fidget with nervously.

The reason became clear soon enough.

“But first,” Evan said quietly, “there’s the Inauguration, of course.”

Regulus nodded, trying to meet Evan’s eyes, but Evan was still focused on the grass, absently plucking a few blades.

“What is it?” Regulus asked quietly.

Evan opened his mouth, then closed it again. He still didn’t look at him.

Regulus leaned back slightly.

“It’s alright, you know…”

Evan now finally turned his head, meeting his gaze.

“It’s alright to… not like it,” Regulus said. “To dread it.”

Oh, he knew that feeling too well — the one Evan couldn’t quite put words to. He’d felt it all a year ago. That feeling, that knowledge that the sacrifice was a necessary evil — part of a greater plan — but hating the prospect of becoming a killer. He’d loathed the idea of killing someone, of standing among so many other Revolutionaries during some dark ritual, deliberately taking a life with so many spectators.

Evan let out a long breath, something fraying at the edges of it. “I don’t think Barty dreads it.”

Regulus swallowed.

They hadn’t really talked about the Marking — not openly — but Regulus knew when it was happening and who would be there: Mulciber, Avery, Severus… Barty and Evan. And he’d known, without needing to be told, that Barty wouldn’t feel the same unease he had. Not even close.

“Yeah, well. That’s Barty for you.” Regulus gave a faint smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I did though. I dreaded it.”

There was something strangely grateful in Evan’s expression — like those words had lifted some hidden weight from his shoulders, like he’d needed to hear them.

“What is it like?” Evan eventually asked, barely audible.

Regulus paused. “To kill someone?”

Evan nodded.

For a moment, Regulus felt like he was back in Cissy’s morning room, where he had asked that exact same question to Thorne. Somehow, the answer he’d received came to him as though it were carved into his bones.

“Well,” he said, quietly. “It’s actually rather mundane.” He looked down at his hands. “But you’re going to do it premeditatedly. That’s different for a first time. It would’ve been easier if it had been… spontaneous.”

Evan nodded slowly, brows drawn together. Then, he glanced back at him with something unmistakably sharp in his gaze.

“How… how many people have you killed?”

Regulus looked away, a hollow sort of weight settling in his chest. He reached for another stone and tossed it into the water. There was a temptation to lie, but somehow it felt he’d be doing Evan an injustice if he were to lie, if he were to soften it, sugarcoat it.

It’s not all fun and games.

“Five.”

Evan didn’t say anything at first. Regulus could feel his eyes on him, though, like he was trying to make sense of what that number meant — and what it had done to the person who’d carried it.

“And who… who did you choose? For the ritual?” he eventually asked, his voice quiet.

Regulus exhaled deeply. “I didn’t choose anyone. They chose for me. Someone they thought I’d be… comfortable with.”

Evan tilted his head slightly. “Who was it?”

Regulus gave a short, bitter huff. “A child molester.”

Evan didn’t flinch, nor looked away. He just gave a single, sharp nod.

“That makes sense.”

It took a moment for that statement to land, for Regulus to understand

what it implied.

He turned fully to Evan. “You know.” Evan held his gaze. “You know… about me. My past.”

Evan nodded. “I overheard my mum talking about it with your aunt,” Evan said, a bit uncomfortably. “A few years back.” Then, a bit more defensive, “I don’t know the details… But — but I know the gist.”

Regulus let out another breath, trying to release the tightness in his chest. He felt the enormity of it all — of the fact that Evan had known for years about Regulus’s biggest secret, his biggest shame. And how he apparently still wanted to be friends with him. How he still sat there beside him like nothing had changed.

“Does Barty know?”

Evan shook his head. “No. I don’t think that’s my story to tell.”

Now it was Regulus looking at Evan with that same quiet gratitude.

And then they watched the lake some more.

*****

Regulus had barely slept and considered it nothing short of a miracle that his heart was still functioning when he sank into his seat at the Slytherin table just before lunch.

Noon.

In ten minutes, the clock would strike twelve.

Tick. Tack. Tick. Tack.

He was alone with Isa. Barty and Evan were busy tearing apart the Slytherin common room — and probably every dormitory — in a desperate search for the bottle of Firewhiskey Barty had stolen from his father. Regulus had hidden it well, enchanted it with a Sticking Charm and a few anti-Summoning hexes — everything to keep them distracted for as long as possible.

It would be too complicated otherwise. Too complicated to explain to them why he was fighting on the other side. Too complicated to explain to the other side why his friends were asking too many questions. And far, far too complicated to explain that it had, in fact, been their side that had initiated this.

No — better to keep them away from the mayhem.

Five minutes.

Tick. Tack. Tick. Tack.

Noon.

A calculated time. Not in the dead of night, when it could go unnoticed or be covered up. No — this was a strategic move. In the open, at midday, when you'd expect it least. Mr. Nott had proposed it, and the brief glance between him and Regulus was enough for Regulus to see the calculation in that, too. Most students would be safely inside, having lunch. Perhaps for some Revolutionaries, the moral compass wasn't completely broken.

Tick. Tack. Tick. Tack.

His palms were sweating. His goblet shook slightly in his hand. His heart felt as if it was plunging deeper and deeper into his stomach. Isa said something, but he didn't hear her. His leg had begun twitching under the table. He glanced up toward the Staff Table.

Dumbledore was there.

He hadn't been around much lately, but today — thankfully — he was. Regulus didn't like the man, but even his harshest critics had to admit that he was a formidable wizard. He'd surely protect Hogwarts.

Not enough, apparently.

Because the very instant the clock struck twelve—

A voice echoed across the Hall.

"All students are to remain inside the Castle. Prefects, make sure students stay put!"

For a moment, Regulus couldn't place the source. Then he saw it — a silvery Patronus darting through the air, a weasel. It disappeared through the walls and left an eerie silence behind.

And then the Hall erupted.

Dumbledore stood immediately. Half the staff followed — McGonagall, Flitwick, Valaine and Harlowe from Ancient Runes were already hurrying after him. Slughorn remained behind, along with

Professor Vance from Arithmancy, clearly left to keep order in the Great Hall.

It was chaos immediately — conversation swelled to a roar, chairs scraped, dishes clattered, people shouted in confusion, in panic. Everyone seemed to clock that something serious was going on, and without any information and with Dumbledore leaving like that, imagination was running wild.

Regulus's eyes darted to the Gryffindor table.

James and Evans were already on their feet — of course they were, they were the Head Boy and Girl, after all. They'd have orders to gather the Prefects, secure the corridors, manage the panic. But then, Regulus saw that they weren't the only ones standing up. Sirius, Lupin, Pettigrew, McKinnon and a few others Regulus didn't know by name — all of them were on their feet, slipping past benches and heading for the exit.

Of course. Bloody reckless Gryffindors — could never leave things alone.

He turned to Isa.

"Promise me you'll stay here."

She blinked. "What?"

He stood, his voice firm and pleading at the same time. "Promise me, Ies. Stay. Here."

Her eyes went wide, frightened. "Y—yes — what's going—"

But he didn't let her finish. There was no time for that now.

He turned and strode out of the Hall, stepping straight into pandemonium.

"Back to the Great Hall — all of you!" McGonagall's voice cut like a whip through the noise. She was standing near the base of the stairs, arms outstretched, blocking a growing group of students — mostly the Gryffindors, but now a few Ravenclaws had joined them too.

A clamour of protest rose around her, all voices overlapping, none of them making much sense.

"You two — back inside," she snapped, eyes narrowing at James and

Evans. “Your duty is in the Hall. I expect the Head Boy and Girl to maintain order—”

James stepped forward. “We’ll send the Prefects. We can help out here.”

“You’re students,” McGonagall barked. “You stay in the Hall—”

Her objections were drowned out by the arrival of two figures, bursting into the Entrance Hall. Their robes were soaked, breaths ragged. They weren’t from the Hogwarts Staff, so Regulus deducted they must be Aurors.

“*Dementors!*” one of them shouted. “Dozens — maybe more!”

“Could be a hundred,” the other gasped. “The Ministry needs to be informed now — we need every Professor on this in the meantime—”

Sirius’s voice cut through it all. “Let us help! We’re seventh-years, we’re trained — *this* is what all of it’s been for!”

McGonagall looked torn — eyes flicking from the Aurors to the students, back again. She opened her mouth — but before she could speak, the students were already running, following the Aurors. Seventh-year Gryffindors, Ravenclaws, now also some Hufflepuffs and even Lively, the Slytherin Keeper…

Regulus stood frozen to the spot.

Could be a hundred.

No. *No* — this wasn’t how it was supposed to go.

They’d only meant to let a few Dementors loose — to make a point, to send a message. Nothing catastrophic, nothing a handful of Aurors couldn’t handle.

They weren’t even meant to get onto the grounds.

Fuck. Fuck. FUCK.

So he ran.

He burst through the doors and onto the Hogwarts grounds — and what he saw nearly knocked the breath from his lungs.

The world had gone grey. Flat, cold. There was no sun, no warmth, no

colour. Just an expanse of dead grass and shadow, swallowed by an unnatural chill. It was like stepping into a grave. The cold hit him instantly, slicing into his lungs, clinging to his skin like ice beneath the bone.

Dementors. *Everywhere.*

Dozens of them, gliding across the field, closing in on every patch of light, of hope. Professors and Aurors were already engaged in the fight, spells flying, Patronuses glowing — but it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

A wave of hopelessness crashed over him.

They'd never drive them all back.

They were severely outnumbered. Outmatched completely. Oh — and what if they got to the students? Surely there were still some on the grounds — people who hadn't come to lunch…

Miller.

She hadn't been in the Hall. *Shit*, she hadn't been in the Hall.

Had she gone to the pitch after all?

Complete and utter panic mastered him. He'd counted on a minor disruption — maybe one, maybe *one* Dementor breaching the grounds, in the worst-case scenario. Oh, if he'd *known*, if he'd had any idea it would turn out like this—

He should have made sure. Should have made absolutely sure Miller wasn't going to leave the common room.

But then again — *did it matter?* Why would it matter? The Dementors were going to get in either way, they were going to get everyone — it was too late, too fucking late—

"Black!"

A voice snapped him out of it.

Regulus whipped his head around to the face of McKinnon, just ahead, her hair wild and wand drawn. Her patronus was already blazing.

"Either bloody help or get back inside!"

Her voice cut through the icy fog in his hopeless brain. He was spiralling — but he now realised it was not because of himself, but because of them — the Dementors. They were in his head, feeding and distorting. He had to fight. If he could just fight them off, he'd see clearly again.

He needed happy thoughts — something bright, something strong.

But he didn't really have one, did he?

His life had been nothing but pain, shame and dread.

He'd been torn, defiled by his governor, and all that was left was this — a pathetic piece of nothing, a miserable scrap of a person who'd made all the wrong choices. And there was no turning back now, no chance to undid what he had done. No redemption, no second chances, no—

No.

This was the Dementors again.

He *did* have happy thoughts, and there *were* good people in his life.

There was Sirius. Sirius, playing chess with him as a kid, just to have an excuse to hang around — even though he'd hated chess. Sirius, racing him on toy brooms in the garden. Sirius reading out loud from one of Regulus's books, doing the voices — all manic and dramatic. Sirius who, when Mother wasn't watching, would ruffle his hair and tackle him to the ground, always ending in a hug — conveying all the brotherly love that he couldn't put into words.

There was Isa. Isa, witty and sharp, her loyalty rivalling that of any Gryffindor out there. All the things she'd done for him…. The weeks of Occlumency, the unwavering support even when he'd told her about James…

Oh, and James…

I love you too.

"Expecto patronum!"

His voice rang out over the chaos — and light erupted from the end of his wand.

At the same time, dozens more Aurors surged from the edge of the

grounds, seizing Regulus's attention. The tide was finally turning — the sky now alight with gleaming Patronuses. A falcon soared overhead, a lion bounded through the grass, a lynx darted between the trees. Silver crashed into shadow like waves against rock and the Dementors reeled, pushed back.

Regulus didn't stop.

His eyes swept towards the lake. There — more Dementors were gathering, further out. There weren't many people stationed there. So, he sprinted past the clustered fighters and spells and gleaming shapes and headed for the far side of the grounds.

He did not want to think about anyone, least of all Sirius or James, being here. If they were here… Sure, they could defend themselves, but they were reckless, and in a situation like this—

He shook his head, physically trying to shake off another round of spiralling thoughts. He raised his wand and casted another Patronus. A silvery blur erupted forward — but a sudden prickling down his spine made him spin.

He'd been too late, too preoccupied to notice another Dementor, gliding silently behind him, only mere feet away.

He moved to raise his wand, but then, suddenly, it was gone — flung backwards by a silvery hawk that came soaring in from the side.

Regulus turned, chest heaving.

The Patronus had come from an Auror — middle-aged, pale-faced. Regulus met his eye, gave a sharp nod of thanks, and pushed forward again, heading for the lake.

Things were looking better now. The air was still cold, the ground still choked in shadow, but the tide had shifted. With so many reinforcements now on the ground, the Dementors were thinning, and it no longer felt like a losing battle.

Regulus let out a breath in relief.

But then he saw two figures across the lake.

Sirius — hair flying, wand raised — looking like he was exactly where he belonged. And further down, nearer the willow trees, James — yelling across the distance.

“Another one, Padfoot — oh, you’ve missed a bloody obvious one, there!”

Sirius barked a laugh. “That’s rich, coming from you — that one nearly nicked your arse!”

He raised his wand, and a great black dog leapt forward from its tip — snarling, slamming into the mist. The Dementor vanished.

The two of them grinned — breathless, flushed, alive with adrenaline. For a moment, they laughed.

And that’s when Regulus saw it.

Sirius, too preoccupied with laughing and catching his breath, didn’t see the figure gliding up behind him.

And it was so, *so* close.

“Sirius!” Regulus shouted, wand already snapping up.

He didn’t think, didn’t hesitate — everything went automatically. He looked — really looked — at James, the beautiful boy across the lake, and let the feeling take over. The warmth, the love. The impossible euphoria at the thought that James had been lying on his chest, looking at *him* and had said *I love you too* .

“Expecto Patronum!”

The silver light surged from his wand and crashed into the Dementor just feet from his brother. And with that, it blasted back, dissolving into the mist.

Sirius spun round.

Their eyes met.

And then — silence.

At first, Regulus thought it was shock. Sirius clearly hadn’t realised the soul-sucking creature had been behind him — let alone expected *Regulus* to be the one to cast it off.

Then the silence stretched, and Regulus wondered if he was imagining it. Maybe it was just the sudden shift — the crash from adrenaline and horror and shouting into sudden stillness.

But then it kept stretching.

Sirius wasn't looking at him anymore. He was looking past him — wide-eyed, frozen. Regulus followed his gaze.

He was staring at the Patronus.

Regulus turned, too — and realised.

He hadn't *seen* it, not properly. The first time, he'd been too distracted by the Aurors pouring in. The second time, he'd had to spin to face that Dementor, the Auror's hawk intervening before he could see what he'd conjured. And just now he had been too distracted by the sight of James.

But now… now he saw it.

Regulus hadn't cast many Patronuses in his life and, of course, only as part of practice. His Patronus had been an owl. It made sense. Owls were intelligent, solitary creatures. Regulus resonated with them, at some level.

But the silvery animal erupting from his wand was no owl.

It was a *stag*.

Tall and magnificent — its antlers branching like silver lightning. It galloped in elegant strides across the lake's edge, scattering mist with each step.

Regulus stared, stunned.

Why was his Patronus an owl no more?

Well, it explained Sirius's surprise — he had, after all, known that Regulus's Patronus had always been an owl…

Yet, when Regulus turned to his brother again, the situation started to unsettle him. Sirius looked *too* shocked. And, beyond that, there was something else… like he was hurt.

Somehow, the world shrank to just the sight of Sirius, standing there, wind catching in his hair, eyes wide with realisation. As if someone had cracked open the earth beneath his feet.

Sirius looked at James — then at Regulus — and then, finally, *finally*, he spoke.

“It is you,” he said, voice hoarse, stunned, as though the words were clawing out of his throat. “The love letters… the dark curls… *It’s you.*”

Regulus froze. His stomach dropped. His throat closed.

No, no, no — *no*.

“*You’re* the secret lover.”

Chapter End Notes

Dum dum dum!

That brings us back to the titles of the fics. The first one, The Gathering Storm, really captured the proverbial storm brewing — not just in the wizarding world (the war/revolution), but also within Regulus himself (falling for James). The second title, The Battling Minds, reflects Reg’s inner struggle with his feelings for James, but also ties into the whole Occlumency ordeal with Bellatrix and, more broadly, the ideological battle for minds that always comes with war — especially as recruitment was a major theme.

And now we get to fully understand the third title too. Binding Souls - we've got the good old soul-sucking Dementors, Voldemort splitting and binding his soul to objects, and Regulus binding his soul to James (soulmates) — which, in turn, changed his Patronus. Unfortunately for him, that little detail also led to Sirius finding out...

And with that, the story comes to an end. Well, for now! The fourth work will be the final one, and will be slightly longer (around 35 chapters) than the previous individual ones. There are a few plot threads I want to flesh out, and I’d like to have a decent number of chapters written before I start posting so I can stick to a proper schedule. I’m thinking of posting two chapters a week, which means I’ll need a bit of a buffer. Knowing me, I’ll be back very soon (a few weeks tops).

I, again, want to thank everyone of you for leaving kudos and commenting! I think I was already 2/3 in the first fic before I received my first ever comment and to see that people are taking the effort (and time) to reflect, or praise or discuss, well - it's so, so much appreciated. So thank you for that.

Let me know what you think and as always, lots of love!

End Notes

A little bit of comedy in times of war. This scene has been living in my head for weeks. You have no idea how much fun I had working it out.

As always, thanks for reading and let me know what you think.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!